

MY NEW ZEALAND STORY

CYCLONE
BOLA

The diary of Amy Dyer,
Gisborne, 1988

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Author's note

Although Amy Dyer, her parents and several others in the story are fictional (for instance Mr Heperi and the Standard 4 class) many others in the tale are actual people.

June Dyer (and her late husband Jim) are long-time friends of mine as are Wynne and Ross Craill. Some are my own family members who lived through Bola (Richard who worked on Hoot's farm and his sister who lived at Hick's Bay are a nephew and niece). Others are real people I met while researching or people who had been reported in the newspaper or who held 'public' positions (eg Prime Minister Lange).

I have attempted to set out the facts as accurately as possible. If some are incorrect I apologise.

Friday 12th February 1988

This is the worst day of my life. Maybe not the very worst – that was when Misty my cat got run over – but pretty near it. Australian friends of my parents phoned from Townsville and asked Mum and Dad if they'd like to sail the *Laureen Jane* back to New Zealand. They're flying over here for a wedding then want to sail it on to Tahiti.

Dad went berserk, dancing all over the kitchen yelling, "Is fire hot?" and other stupid things that mean of course he would. His life's dreams are about sailing and he and Mum (and sometimes me too) have sailed all over the place. The last big trip we did was when I was ten and we sailed our own *Jasmina P* from Perth to Darwin, then sold her. I had a whole term off school, which was neat. All I had to do was write a story about it when I got back.

But this time I have to stay behind. Man, did we have a row! It went on for ages. I yelled, Dad yelled and Mum kept saying, "Just listen, Amy. Just listen for a moment." I went on yelling, then I cried and said they were bad parents and only ever cared about themselves and never considered me (which actually is a little bit true – they're sort of like hippies or gypsies and seem to think the world is there for them to explore whenever it suits them).

Dad whacked the table with his hand and roared, "We are thinking of you. We are thinking of your future. You'll be at High School next year, and right now you need to devote every day possible to your education."

"Well, I'm not staying with the Whitmores," I screamed. (They're our neighbours who are always 'sitting' me for some reason or other.) "And I'm sure not going to boarding school."

"Did anyone say you were?" said Mum, her eyes brightening. "I've got a much better idea."

Dad and I stopped shouting and looked at her.

"Aunty June and Uncle Jim." They're my great uncle and aunt. "You like them and they dote on you ..."

"But they're in Gisborne!"

"Aah," said Dad. "Gisborne, the city with the pink clock tower, the shortest river in New Zealand and land that grows the best chardonnay grapes."

"I'm not going to Gisborne," I said. "I don't know anyone there. I'll be stuck in the backblocks with no friends and nothing to do ... and I hate farms."

Dad shook his head. "It's not a farm, Amy, it's a vineyard."

"As if I care," I shouted. "I hate you both and it would serve you right if you got caught in a storm." I stalked off to my room and slammed the door.

So here I am, writing my diary as I always do, and I can hear Mum talking on the phone. It will be to Aunty June.

Sunday 14th February

It's Valentine's Day and I certainly didn't give my parents a Valentine's card. I didn't get one from anyone either. The trip to Gisborne is close to being finalised. Aunty June had a long talk with me. She can be very persuasive. I especially like the idea of two cats and Stray the dog. And Uncle Jim will fix up Heather's old bike for me to use.

I'll be the only young person at their place – just like here. Aunty June's family are all Mum and Dad's age – and all married except for Heather. She's a physio at Gisborne Hospital and lives in the city. According to Aunty June, having me to stay will be special and she'll make my favourite guava jelly from the fruit in their garden. She brought some for me when she and Uncle Jim came and stayed about 3 years ago and I wouldn't let anyone else have more than one spoonful each.

Wednesday 17th February

Today we saw the Principal at Northcote Intermediate. I was hoping she'd tell my parents they had to stay home and look after me but she was ecstatic about the sailing adventure and thought my stay in Gisborne would be 'very beneficial' to my overall education. She called in Mrs Henderson, my class teacher, and they decided that it would be best if she set me work to do as I'll only be away for six weeks.

"You'll be happy with that won't you, Amy?" the Principal said. Then, without waiting for me to answer, she turned to Dad and Mum and asked them if they would show their movie of the sailing adventure to the school assembly when they get back.

Dad puffed himself up and Mum said it would be an honour. (I'm planning to be sick that day.) In my head I was thinking, 'With a bit of luck the camera will fall overboard.'

Friday 19th February

Mum and Dad arrived home with their flights to Townsville booked and mine to Gisborne. They got some great deal for next Monday. I'm not interested. I had to say goodbye to all my friends and we kissed

and hugged and cried. Both Joanne and Hannah think it's shocking that my parents are abandoning me and offered to have me stay with them.

Jenny got all excited and said, "But Amy, it's only for six weeks and think of it as being free." She has a point I suppose. We're all going to write to each other, though I told them that their letters may take weeks to get to me. I read about a country place where the mail only came every 3 months.

Sunday 21st February

8 p.m. I'm packed and ready to go. I fly out in the morning and Mum and Dad leave in the early evening. They arrive in Townsville at almost the same time that they leave here. That's because of the date-line. New Zealand is near this imaginary line so is first to see a new day. If you fly westward, of course, you sometimes beat the clock and, like Mum and Dad, arrive almost at the same time that you left. If you travel east you go backwards in time. Weird!

Mrs Henderson told me that Mt Hikurangi, near Gisborne, is the first place in the world to see the sun. Dad said that was for most of the year. In mid-summer some of the high suburbs in Dunedin get the first sun rays. Something to do with the tilt of the world and the

long hours of light that the south gets. I'm feeling just a little bit scared at leaving Mum and Dad. I know I've been mad at them but I do love them and, if I had my way, I'd sooner be with them. But it is a little bit exciting to go to Gisborne, too. I plan to come back with some adventures that will make them wish they'd been there with me.

Monday 22nd February 1988

What a day! So much has happened. Firstly, I couldn't sleep as so many thoughts were flying around in my head. Would Mum and Dad be safe in the *Laureen Jane*? Did they know how to work the radio if they got into trouble? Would they be sure to clip their safety lines on each time they were on deck?

Then I must've fallen into such a deep sleep that Mum had to shake me awake and I jumped out of bed so quickly I felt dizzy. I wore my new T-shirt, denim jacket and jeans and felt quite grown up catching a plane on my own. I tried not to cry as I walked out to the little plane but I couldn't help some tears dropping onto my arm.

We didn't have an air hostess. One of the pilots told us all the safety rules and checked our safety belts. We didn't fly too high and I could see the countryside with hills and towns just like a map. The Gisborne flat stretched out like an enormous patchwork quilt and the houses and animals seemed as small as toys. Gisborne city looked tiny nestled at the northern end of Poverty Bay and in the distance I could see a wide river (the Waipaoa, Uncle Jim told me later) snaking its way across the flats to meet the Pacific Ocean at the southern end of the bay.

Uncle Jim was at the airport to meet me. He's taller and thinner than I remembered, and has a warm smile. He drove me into town first before we came home. On the way he showed me the bronze statue of Young Nick situated on the grass above Waikanae beach near the Port. Nick Young was the 12-year-old assistant to the surgeon on Captain Cook's ship the *Endeavour*. He was the first one to sight land there in 1769 and Captain Cook named the headland after him as a reward – Young Nick's Head – and he apparently got a gallon of rum too!

Right now I'm in my bedroom at Ormond Valley. I have a cosy bed with a blue bedspread covered in white daisies, a chest of drawers, a mirror, a desk and chair, and a red and blue mat on the floor. Uncle Jim has hung a big poster of Rangitoto on the wall so that I feel more at home. I've put a photo of Mum and Dad on the dresser. It's the one taken when they went to someone's wedding. Mum has her big hairdo – her '80s haircut' she calls it. That's because she used to have long, floating hair and now it's much shorter and all frizzed out. The dress she's wearing has these huge shoulder pads. Dad is in his dress jeans and a shirt without a tie. He had his long hair cut ages ago. "Can't stay in the 70s forever," he said. The photo I like best of them (the one I keep in my wallet) is one of them in their shorts on the beach in Perth. They look so happy.

When Aunty June came home from school, she gave me a hug. "There's no mistaking that you're a Dyer," she said. "You look so like an aunt of Jim's! Her name was Amelia. We have a photo of her here somewhere." She ferreted about and found this old-fashioned picture of a lady who was staring at the camera like a frightened possum caught in car lights! But to be fair, even I saw a likeness – we had the same sort of dark thick hair. Hers was loose and so is mine today. From now on I think I'll wear it in a ponytail.

Aunty June giggled. She has a giggle-giggle that makes others want to giggle. "You don't like the thought of being like her, do you! For one thing, she's wearing such impractical bulky clothes – and look at her boots! It would take half an hour to do up the lacing. But actually she was very clever. She sketched and wrote books about flowers and plants." A thought raced through my mind that maybe it wasn't so bad being like her ... and in fact I quite liked the name Amelia.

We had venison casserole for tea. Some friend of Uncle Jim's had been out hunting. I wasn't sure I was going to like it but it was yummy. Dessert was apple pie. The apples were off the trees in the garden. Mum hardly ever makes dessert. If I ever suggest it, she says, "Eat an orange with a cracker biscuit." Honestly! My parents are quite nuts.

Tomorrow I will write about the house and valley for Mrs Henderson. It's one of the first questions in my lesson pack. I'm so tired I feel I may never wake up. Aunty June said it was probably all the excitement and Uncle Jim added, "... and the country air."

It sure is country; not a light to be seen, and so dark. If I hold my hand up to my face I can't see it! Tiger the tortoiseshell cat is curled up on my bed and am I glad. I don't know where Leo is. He's so black you'd never see him at night anyway. Stray the dog sleeps on the porch. He's not allowed inside. He's a sort of hairy sheep dog and is used to the outdoors.

I wonder if Mum and Dad are thinking of me.

Tuesday 23rd February

I was woken with birds chirping in the persimmon tree by my bedroom this morning. The persimmons are ripe at the moment and are a deep orange colour. We had some for breakfast. Yum! The birds like them too and eat the insides out as soon as they're ripe. They also like the grapes. The first thing I heard when I arrived yesterday was a gunshot ... then another. Or that's what I thought the blast was. It was actually an automatic banging machine set up to scare the birds from the vineyard. It sure gave me a fright! Uncle Jim showed me

the machine. It's fuelled by a gas bottle and the bangs are set on a timer. I watched a few birds fly off quickly when a bang rang out and just as they flew back the banger would go off again.

For school I dressed in my blue skirt, white T-shirt and sandals and did my hair in a ponytail. The primary kids don't wear uniforms like we do at Intermediate.

Mum phoned from Townsville before Aunty June and I left. It was five o'clock in the morning there! (It's that dateline thing again ... they're 3 hours behind us!) She and Dad were as chirpy as kookaburras and plan to stock the *Laureen Jane* today, do a trial run around the harbour then set off on the high tide tomorrow for Vanuatu.

I was surprised that I didn't feel jealous, but I was looking forward to my own adventure I think – like going to school with Aunty June and meeting new kids.

Later

What a day! Aunty June drove us to Gisborne Central Primary where she teaches the New Entrants. It's about 12 km. First we drove down Ormond Valley to Ormond village (3 or 4 km) then turned onto State Highway 2, which winds through the Waioeka Gorge from the Bay of Plenty to Gisborne. For a time the main road follows the Waipaoa River (which I saw from the plane yesterday) but

it's not visible from the road. The high stopbanks block the view. They were built to stop flooding in the township and the farmland on the other side. Aunty June said we can drive or walk along the top of the stopbank one day. Apparently the Waipaoa floods quite a lot.

I was given a desk in Mr Heperi's class at Aunty June's primary school. He has one of the Year 6 classes but I have my own Year 8 lessons from Northcote Intermediate (prepared by Mrs Henderson). Mr Heperi said he went to training college with Mrs Henderson. I suppose that's why he doesn't mind having me.

At playtime I played skipping with the girls. They're all younger than me but some are much taller.

I wrote a long letter for Mrs Henderson telling her all the things I'd done and seen. Mr Heperi loaned me a book about Gisborne. I've just finished the beginning chapters so I added this on to Mrs Henderson's letter:

Gisborne Port is at the mouth of the shortest river in NZ, the Turanganui River (1200 metres long). It is formed by the joining of two other large rivers, the Taruheru and the Waimata in the middle of Gisborne township.

Ormond is a small village about 13 kilometres from Gisborne, built alongside the Waipaoa River. It had an interesting beginning. It was originally a Maori Pa site. In the 1860s there was a lot of fighting between various Maori tribes as well as between the European settlers and the Maori

tribes. *The famous chieftain Te Kooti led some of the fighting (including the Poverty Bay massacre in 1868).*

By the time I had sussed that out it was lunchtime, so I sat with some of the girls and they asked me about Northcote and Auckland. They thought it was cool that we went by ferry to Auckland sometimes. Then it was back to more info for Mrs Henderson.

In 1860, Ormond was set up as the headquarters of the Armed Constabulary (a police force that carries guns). 96 men and their families were stationed there to keep the peace. When the fighting ended, the land at Ormond was confiscated by the Government and given to loyal Maori supporters of the Government and to the officers and men of the constabulary.

It seemed like an out and out war to me as I read. It was crazy that they couldn't work something out. When I asked Mr Heperi he screwed his face up. "It's a very vexed issue. Maori believed that Pakeha were stealing their land and Pakeha believed they owned it, plus a number of other differences. It was a bit of a pickle and it's still going on today." He shook his head. "It's too big for now but one day you need to study it."

I said I would, but right now I was too busy learning about Ormond.

The school at Ormond was the first on the Poverty Bay Flats. It was built in 1874 and started with 12 pupils, all

children of the armed constabulary. The school still exists but has been shifted twice because of flooding.

I kept getting distracted with things going on in the class. For instance, Mr Heperi asked me to hear some reading with two boys who are mischief makers. I made them read their work twice then do their spelling list in their notebook for their homework.

In no time it was afternoon break. It was hot out in the playground. One of the kids said it was 25 degrees. How he knew that, I have no idea! Back in the classroom, I wrote about the Ormond of today.

Ormond is a now a rich farming area. They grow crops like kiwifruit, apples, citrus, grapes, maize, squash (which are orange pumpkins), sweetcorn and tomatoes. The township has a store run by Mr and Mrs Manson. Their store sells everything. It's also the Post Office and petrol station. There's a two-storey pub, two churches, a primary school and some tennis courts.

Later at home

I re-read the stuff I'd done for Mrs Henderson and think she'd be most impressed. (Except I think I should change 'pub' to 'hotel'.) Now I've remembered that I was going to tell her about our house here, so I wrote:

Our house sits up on a knoll in the Ormond Valley, which runs out sideways from the main road to Ormond township.

The entry to the valley is narrow and the valley is warmer than out on the main Gisborne Flats. Aunty June calls it a microclimate, meaning that it's a special climate in a smaller area. The house has 4 bedrooms (2 downstairs) with a big open kitchen/living room. The kitchen part looks out across the water tank to the vineyard, and the living room part faces out to the trees and lawn and the road. At the gate is the biggest oak tree I've ever seen. I can't wait to climb it. Kit (the white goat) keeps the grass down on the roadside.

Too tired to write any more ...

Wednesday 24th February

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Those chirruping birds woke me again so I crept out to get a glass of water. It was only 5.30 a.m.! Not even Uncle Jim was stirring and he gets up pretty early. I'm sitting in my bed now writing before I forget something. After school today I'm going to help him pluck the leaves off the vines so that the grapes get the maximum sun.

Aunty June and Uncle Jim came here in 1982. Aunty June said it was just a paddock then, with sheep on it. "And see that bit there?" She pointed to the slope on the top side of the house where the three kune kune pigs root about. "That was quite a hill and Uncle Jim bulldozed it till it was almost flat. Next we had to set up the fences for the grapevines to grow up and then plant the grapes."

I asked how many hectares they owned.

“Oh, now you’ve got me! I have no idea how many hectares,” she said. “Just can’t get my head around metrics when it comes to land. But it’s sixteen acres. And it was just rough paddock when we came.” She said it was a massive job to get the fences up and the grapevines in and she wonders how they did it. “But look at it, Amy,” she said. “Grapes galore – and nearly ready to pick. All our hard work coming to fruition.”

I looked at the rows of vines this morning and thought how neat and smart they looked. The ones right in front of the house run up and down the valley and the ones at either end run crosswise.

Aunty June has just come out of the shower so I better get moving.

Evening

Mr Heperi was pleased with what I’d written for Mrs Henderson and told me to keep it up so she’ll know I’m not slacking. I decided to fill her in on what Uncle Jim had told me this morning about looking after the grapes.

Not many people live in the valley and there are only two vineyards, ours and the organic one next door. Uncle Jim has to be very careful to spray only on still days in case the spray drifts on the wind and pollutes the organic grapes. He has to keep a spray chart throughout the season and when

the grapes are picked the chart goes with them to the winery. He sprays as little as possible. "Only if we get a grey mould called botrytis," he said. "Then I use copper sulphate."

I looked up botrytis in the dictionary at school. It's a weird mould! One sort rots the grapes and the other sort is **encouraged** to be on the grapes and is used to make special wines. The one at Uncle Jim's rots them. (I added that in for Mrs Henderson. I can just see her putting little ticks by all the facts I've found out!)

I got interrupted there as Aunty June wanted me to mash the spuds and pepper the green beans we'd picked earlier from the garden. Then we had dinner (lamb chops) and Uncle Jim and I did the dishes.

Later

I added a bit more for Mrs Henderson. Then she can picture exactly where I am and what is happening.

Our nearest neighbours are half a kilometre away. Most of the land belongs to a Mr Benson. He runs sheep and cattle. A man called Richard drives past our place most days and drops off the Gisborne Herald. He works for Mr Gibson at the head of the valley. Mr Gibson farms sheep and cattle too. His farm is steep and in winter there can be snow on the tops.

A couple of families live up the side valley opposite us and there's another family not far away. They also have

sheep and cattle. I met two of the girls, Bonnie and Jackie, at school. We might go bike riding at the weekend.

We have rainwater for the house. It runs from the roof into gutters which funnel it into a large tank which sits up high on a tank stand to make it easier to pump into the house. Water for use in the garden or on the vineyard is piped from a side stream on the eastern hills to a tap outside.

Before I came here I never gave a thought to where our water in Northcote came from. When I get home again I must find out. (I won't tell Mrs Henderson that!)

Bedtime

I've just remembered that after lunch I did art with Mr Heperi's class. A girl called Gracie painted her whole page with orange circles and called it her squash paddock. I thought it was brilliant. I'd seen a paddock just like it on the way to school and I'd said to Aunty June, "It looks like a giant's orange carpet." There must have been ten hectares of squash, all ripe and ready to go to market.

I've just had a shower and am sitting here in my room in my pink and white silk nightie that we bought in Singapore last year when we went for another sailing adventure.

After dinner I walked with Uncle Jim down to a big ditch that runs through the bottom of the property to check that it was free of weeds. Its official name is the

Mahaunga Drain but locals just call it 'the Drain'. It was made back in the 1890s when the valley was mostly swamp. After a big flood in the 1950s a floodgate was put in the Drain near where it meets the Waipaoa River. The idea was that the gate would shut if the Waipaoa overflowed. That way, the township and the valley would be saved from floods.

"So you have a drain instead of a stream," I said.

Uncle Jim laughed. "That's 'Drain' with a capital 'D'"
(Tomorrow I'll put bits of that in for Mrs H.)

Uncle Jim just heard on the radio that a storm is brewing about 800 km north of Fiji. The Meteorological Centre in Nadi have named it 'Tropical Storm Bola'.

My first thought was for Mum and Dad. "Don't worry, Amy," Uncle Jim said. "They have lots of storms up there and it may not come to anything."

Aunty June came and tucked me into bed. "Your mum and dad are experienced sailors. I remember once when they got caught in a whopping storm in the Tasman. We worried ourselves sick ... and hey presto, they arrived home safely. Wasn't a problem for them!"

I hadn't heard about that but Aunty June seemed to have a lot of faith in my parents so I decided I should too. Anyway, I'm too tired to even think about them at the moment.

Thursday 25th February

I'm at school writing this. Mr Heperi says I'm allowed to do both my diary and Mrs Henderson's lessons at school because I'm doing them both at home too. And I'm really busy living on a vineyard that has animals as well. It's all rush-rush in the mornings. I have Tiger and Leo to feed – and Stray. Then I have to move Kit the goat to a new bit of grass and make sure she won't get herself tangled anywhere. Next I help Uncle Jim feed the kune kune pigs. (There are three, all sows, and Uncle Jim calls them Milly, Jilly and Silly. He's so funny.) Anyway, all that has to be done before breakfast! Aunty June says that on farms people always come last.

Mr Heperi also said that diaries that note the weather were extra interesting. So I'm going to do that from now on.

Today is fine and sunny and predicted to be 25 degrees.

Yesterday, after school, it was cool plucking the leaves so that the grapes can ripen. Before I came here I didn't know about green grapes. I thought all grapes were purple or black. But these grapes make 'white' wine (it's really a faint greeny-yellow colour) and they're green even when they're ripe. They were a bit tart to eat but I did pinch one or two because they looked so plump

and juicy. I also had to keep an eye out for grey mould (didn't find any). These grapes make chardonnay wine (which was what Dad said, before I came here).

Uncle Jim has this strange instrument called a refractometer to measure the amount of sugar in the grapes. When the air temperature is 20°C or more, he squeezes juice from a grape into the refractometer, then squints into it like a pirate using his telescope, and he can somehow read how much sugar is in the grapes. This test is called the Brix test. Uncle Jim says that it's time to pick when the reading is between 18 and 25. It is 17 now. Uncle Jim likes it much higher. "Another week or ten days and the grapes will be sweeter. Then it'll be all go," he said. He let me look into the refractometer but, to tell the truth, I didn't really know what I was looking at.

Gisborne is quite isolated from the rest of NZ. The flat land is some of the most fertile in the world. And it's big. Easily as big as the Waikato Plains. It is surrounded by rough, steep hills, the highest being the rugged Raukumara range to the north. The highest mountain there is Mt Hikurangi (1752 m high). It's the highest mountain in the range and the one that gets the first rays of sun. To the west is Te Urewera National Park, which is rough and steep and covered almost solely in NZ bush. To the south are steep gullies and hills to

negotiate before reaching Wairoa or Napier. Out to sea there is a deep trench known as the Hikurangi trough. This is a great place for fishing.

All this area was formed by volcanic action. When the volcano that formed Lake Taupo blew up in about 200 AD, some ash was blown as far as Gisborne and can be detected in the soil there today, making it fertile for farming. There are hot springs up the coast at Te Puia and way south near Napier at Morere.

That was enough for Mrs Henderson today, I decided. It took me ages to write as I kept being sidetracked with other interesting bits I read. For instance I read that Te Urewera National Park is alive with wild deer and pigs and that they are ruining the bush there. Lots of Gisborne people like to hunt them for food.

Gisborne is a fantastic surfing area. The surfies have a choice of great beaches for surfing: Midway, Waikanae and Wainui. There's some great swimming places too, I'm told. A favourite is Midway Beach. Maybe once the grapes are picked Aunty June and Uncle Jim will take me there.