

Red Teddy

By MOKOPOPAKI

‘Welcome!’ says Rangi, ‘Kia ora.’

Rangi is a tall, good-looking 67-year-old Maori woman. Her long, slightly greying hair is loosely gathered together and held in place with an antique tortoiseshell comb.

She is wearing small gold earrings, a black scoop-necked, fitted short-sleeved top with a vintage ruby red and white Standard Issue woollen skirt and black tights. Her big brown hands are strong but sensitive. Used to hard work and days in the garden. Surprisingly, for someone unafraid of dirt, Rangi has long, well-shaped fingernails, very delicately painted with a pale mauve, pinkish polish. Flash.

Her feet, in neat, black, low-heeled shoes, are drawn together and placed comfortably next to her Shanghai Tang handbag, in red silk and leather with snakeskin straps and jade clasp. ‘It was a gift,’ she explains, purchased in London, by her much loved son Benjamin–Hirama.

Must have been a significant birthday, girl.

‘I was 18 years old when I first came to Auckland, as a bright-eyed youngster, fresh out of rural Rotorua, looking for life in the city. A school friend and I found a flat advertised in the paper. It was a four bed-roomed house on Pompallier Terrace, Ponsonby, for \$35 per week. In the beginning there was just the two of us, but when I got the job at the Medical Laboratory in Grafton Road, I met the girl who became the flatmate that one bored Sunday afternoon cut my hair and gave me a mullet.’

‘In 1969 everyone I knew was into the Hippy vibe. Beads, long hair, jeans, optional guitar, random, loose-fitting clothes, all mixed up and jumbled together.’ She looks down and studies her immaculate and beautifully kept “sensible” shoes. ‘But I never did the sharing clothes gig with the flatmates. That wasn’t my thing. I did, however, have a few blouses and tops I totally liked. What attracted me most was the design. Not so much fabric, texture, or pattern, because it was shape that I went for every time.’ Rangi rubs an invisible scuff mark from the toe of one shoe. ‘Back then I’d say my style was fairly understated and soft. Not

floaty, just soft.'

She talks about shopping.

'At that time, I didn't do many new clothes. Being short of money, I mostly used to hit the op shops.' Rangi reflects. 'I didn't patronise Cook Street Market either. Although they had some amazing stalls with edge, for me, Cook Street always felt like a mall or an over-crowded rabbit warren and fire hazard waiting to happen.'

She becomes a little nostalgic. 'A favourite haunt was Hullabaloo on Queen Street. I loved to go there and hang around being cool.' Rangi adjusts the elegant gold band on her right wrist. 'I've always been something of a jewellery girl, myself. Mostly cheap costume stuff but anything shiny that catches my eye usually gets me going.' She is thoughtful. 'I used to have beads for Africa (and from Africa!). I was never without them or silver bracelets; loads of silver bracelets.' Rangi considers her unadorned left arm, 'These days my passion for the bracelet is somewhat reduced,' she sighs, 'Mostly because at airport security, the jewellery I wore set off the alarms.'

Rangi stretches her legs and then says, ‘I once bought a leather shoulder bag from Browns Mill on Durham Lane. I can’t remember who made it but I liked its functional, pared-back quality. No tassels or danglers for me, mate, just pure and simple.’

She confides, ‘Maybe not that pure and simple because back then I was wearing red lipstick and nail polish.’ Rangi is without regret. ‘It wasn’t an over-the-top, in-your-face kind of red, but it would certainly have been a shade that was out there and true to my sense of style.’ She turns over her hands and examines them critically. ‘I’ve always looked after my nails. They might be long but they’re tough and won’t break.’ Rangi regards the tips of her fingers. ‘Painting my nails has never stopped me from doing dishes or scrubbing pots; besides, should the need arise, I am well aware of the joy of rubber gloves.’ Snap!

Rangi says she thinks doing the dishes is good because when your arms are in the sink you hear what is really going on. ‘Who says a Princess is not allowed to get her hands dirty? I was taught that what you do in no way defines who you are. The ability to stack a

dishwasher, take out the rubbish, vacuum a floor or wipe up a spill is about acting on what needs to be done. Where I come from this is truly the mark of a good person.'

Rangi discusses accessories, footwear and lingerie.

Although she didn't exactly do the Carly Simon, "No Secrets" kind of thing, Rangi did in fact have a floppy hat. 'Mine was red felt with a big, wide brim.' Very liberating. 'In those days, sunglasses were something of an essential extra. To tell you the truth,' Rangi says, 'I just wasn't into them. I may have had a small pair with round Granny lenses like Janis Joplin but I can't remember. What I can remember is that I never, ever, wore boots. No high heels either. I didn't go for your Earth Mother all natural, hemp sandals. Gave them a swerve. I preferred smart, easy-to-wear, casual shoes but they had to be comfortable.'

Rangi concedes that perhaps her most self-indulgent expression of style is the fact that she has 'always, always worn nice underwear.' She laughs, 'Nice underwear or sophisticated, sensual, little lacy things, in matching colours or black.' Rangi is being

deliberately wicked. 'My kind of knickers would not be seen hanging on a country clothes line, back home in good old conservative Rotorua, that's for sure.'

'I have always had a fairly eclectic aesthetic. My skill, if it is one, has been in the art of selection, or playing with putting accessories and clothes together. Possibly what gives my experimentation energy and flair is the discipline of choosing only those combinations that work really well for me. This is why I think my personal style is unique. It's quite self-determined, all my own invention and inspired completely from within.'

Rangi is one of those people who have to decide what to wear well in advance. For her, the process begins with the selection of the correct earrings. Why? Because Rangi really likes earrings! 'If I get the earrings right, then I don't worry too much about what comes next.' There is no conscious attempt to create any kind of mood or feel. 'The outcome is entirely intuitive,' she says.

'You'd think I'd have a huge wardrobe but actually I don't. My collection is quite small but very carefully chosen. All the pieces I have are

interchangeable and this means the combinations I wear are never exactly the same.’ Rangi then discloses that she tends to hold on to her clothes for a very long time. ‘Many of these items I keep fresh by not wearing them for over a year but suddenly I’ll decide to put on a particular garment again and everybody will say, ‘Oh, wow! That’s new! But it ain’t — just brought back from the depths of the wardrobe.’

‘I think style has to be about having the confidence to do your own thing. This sense is not determined by the need to be “on trend.” Neither is it dictated by what is happening in the media.’ Rangi pauses for a moment. ‘Maybe this is why people have difficulty working out how old I am. Good design never dates. It just gets better and better over time. Just like me.’

Rangi offers some last words.

‘When I arrived in Auckland, I really wanted to be rebellious and misbehave. But you know, I could never be naughty, because what it was to be a good girl was so ingrained in me by my Maori grandparents. They were the ones who taught the importance of doing the right

thing, no matter what. Theirs was the training that developed my own sense of autonomy and independence. This spirit I express as a rangatiratanga of the self. Now that's my kind of style.'

Rangitauninihi in conversation with Mokopopaki, 2018.