

Shelter From The Storm

By Julie Taylor

Setting:

The action takes place in an isolated cabin in the middle of the bush (Coromandel, NZ – although location or country could be altered to suit local audiences). Specific local place names and character names are completely fictional. Any resemblance to real life is completely accidental.

Only basic props are required. The fireplace can be ‘imagined’. Smaller props should be reminiscent of a bach (mismatched mugs, etc). The cabin is a holiday home rather than a permanent residence.

Some words and phrase are specific to Kiwi slang (eg. swannie – Swanndri). These words can be replaced by local equivalents if performed outside NZ.

Sound effects could include thunder, lightning, or heavy rain. Bob Dylan’s “Shelter From The Storm” might also prove a useful musical interlude or bookend to the story.

Characters:

Radio – a pre-recorded voice. Male or female. Typical newsreader – formal tone.

Rachel – female. Co-owner of the cabin. A widow. Has two adult children. 40 – 65

Tom – male. Weekend hunter. Separated from his wife. Teenage son. 35 – 60

Tom could be slightly younger than Rachel, a similar age, or slightly older. They are strangers but could potentially view one another as a ‘partner’ if a spark occurred.

The play opens with Rachel listening to the radio. She may be multi-tasking (doing a crossword, for example).

Radio: A heavy rain warning remains in place in the Coromandel, as the region continues to be ravaged by high winds and flooding. Several roads are closed, and emergency services are on standby in the worst affected areas. Residents are advised to stay home if it is safe to do so and to avoid unnecessary travel.

A body has been discovered in the bush near Waipipi Stream. It is thought to be that of the Auckland tramper reported missing on Monday. Police are waiting for confirmation of his identity before releasing further details.

Local bar patron, Neil Blunt, has also been reported missing. He entered the bush on Thursday and failed to return home by Friday, as expected. Search and rescue volunteers have been out in force; however, the storm is hampering search efforts. His wife says Neil is well equipped with food and warm clothing. "He knows the area well and is likely to be taking shelter," she said.

In sporting news, the Black Caps have secured a rare victory...

Rachel switches off the radio. She is not interested in sports. She looks at her watch. It's late afternoon, almost wine o'clock.

Rachel: The sun's definitely over the yardarm.

She looks in the cupboard or pantry for a bottle (mimed). There is one on a high shelf.

Rachel: Damn.

She goes to fetch a stool or chair to stand on.

There is a loud and unexpected knocking on the door. Rachel moves to the door nervously.

Rachel: Who is it?

Tom: *(off)* Hi there. My name is Tom. Tom Matthews.

Rachel: What do you want?

Tom: *(off)* I'm seeking shelter. I need somewhere to wait out the storm. Could I use one of your sheds?

Rachel: Hold on a minute.

Rachel unlocks and opens the door.

Rachel: Oh, goodness. You're soaking! You'd better come in.

Tom: *(off)* I'm OK. I just wanted to rest somewhere until the rain eases a bit...

Rachel: The storm's likely to go on for hours... Maybe overnight. You're wet through. I don't want hypothermia on my conscience. Come on in. Leave your boots and overcoat outside.

Tom: *(enters, dishevelled and in socks)* Thank you so much! It's very generous of you. Tom *(he holds out a hand for a handshake)*. Tom Matthews.

Rachel: *(shaking his hand)* Rachel. Rachel Daniels. Welcome to my humble abode.

Tom: Right now, anywhere dry and warm feels like a palace!

Rachel: Just put your gear down there *(she indicates a clear space at the rear of the acting space. Tom places a backpack and hunting rifle in the area indicated.)* You might want to dry your swannie out too. Let's pop it on a chair in front of the fire. *(Tom removes his Swannndri and places it in front of the fire.)*

Tom: Sorry. I had no idea the storm was going to get this bad!

Rachel: I'm sure you're not the only person caught out by the weather. It's a fast-moving cyclone... There's been a heap of warnings on the radio over the last few hours.

Tom: No mobile coverage... I hadn't heard any updates. But the wind speaks for itself!

Rachel: Indeed! *(An awkward silence)* Gosh, we're sounding a bit British. No conversation other than the weather.... I assume from your gear that you're a hunter?

Tom: Yes, just here for the weekend. I'm up from Tauranga.

Rachel: You know the area well?

Tom: Reasonably, yes. I come as often as I can. It's nice break from the office, plus a good opportunity to shoot some pests if I get the chance.

Rachel: A conservationist at heart?

Tom: Primarily. Although I admit I also enjoy the thrill of the chase. There's something rather primal about man versus beast.

Rachel: Or woman versus beast.

Tom: Of course. I wasn't meaning to sound sexist. You hunt too?

Rachel: I can shoot but I don't enjoy killing animals. It doesn't do it for me. Although, I do admire the pest control aspect...

Tom: Plus, the bush is beautiful. There's something rather magical about being out there in nature.

Rachel: But is it safe to be out there alone? I assume you haven't left a buddy behind in the bush.

Tom: I usually come with my mate, Rob. But Rob tested positive for Covid on Friday. I probably should have left it for another weekend, but I was really looking forward to some time out. So, I came on my own anyway.

Rachel: You do realise it's not safe on your own? What say you had an accident? What if something went wrong – if you came across an overly aggressive pig, or something?

Tom: Yeah, I know. It was a dumb idea to come on my own. And I should have been more aware of the changing weather. Typical rookie mistake.

Rachel: Sorry. I didn't mean to lecture you!

Tom: Nothing more than I deserve.

Rachel: Is there anyone we should contact? To let them know you're safe. A partner? Children? The mobile coverage is almost non-existent here, and my Wi-Fi tends to be dodgy at the best of times, but it's worth a go.

Tom: Thanks, but no need. There's no one expecting to hear from me. No wife – well, not anymore – and a teenage son who only speaks to me when he wants something.

Rachel: What about accommodation? Have you booked a motel unit? I'm pretty sure the road into town will be closed...

Tom: No, I usually make do. Or I stay at the local pub if need be. But I haven't booked anything.

Rachel: Well, camping under the stars isn't looking like a viable option!

Tom: *(laughing)* Not this weekend, no.

Rachel: Can I get you anything to eat or drink? Tea? Coffee?

Tom: Only if you're having something. I'm already putting you out.

Rachel: To be honest, I was about to pour myself a glass of red when you arrived. I don't think there's any beer in the fridge... But I can make a hot drink if you prefer.

Tom: A glass of wine sounds very tempting. If you have enough...

Rachel: I'm well stocked. I'll just get one from the cupboard. *(She climbs onto the stool/chair and reaches up to get a bottle of wine. She is a little unsteady and Tom rushes over and holds Rachel around the waist to steady her. There is an awkward moment.)* Thanks, I must have pushed the bottles further back on the shelf than I thought. Stupid.

Tom: Would you like me to have a go?

Rachel: Thanks, but it's ok. There's a wine cellar under the stairwell. It'll be safer to raid that, than brave the storm to get a stepladder. *(She leaves the room to locate a bottle of wine. Tom has a brief look around the room. Rachel re-enters)* A Central Otago Pinot Noir. I said I was well stocked.

Tom: Nice! And it's a lovely spot you have here...

Rachel: A weekend hideaway. *(She pours 2 glasses of wine and indicates to Tom that he should sit.)* I don't use it much. I have a half share with friends, but they haven't been here for ages...

Tom: Why not? It seems like a perfect place to relax and unwind,

Rachel: That's why we bought it. Originally. A home away from home. But after Mike's accident... I don't know. Maybe it brings back difficult memories.

Tom: Mike's accident?

Rachel: Mike was my husband. He died.

Tom: Oh, God, sorry. I didn't mean to pry.

Rachel: It's OK. Everyone avoids talking about it, but I find it cathartic. It's like coming here... so many good memories. Why avoid it just because of one negative event.

Tom: He died...here?

Rachel: No, in the bush. A hunting accident. No-one really knows what happened. Not exactly. He got separated from Simon, his best friend. His gun malfunctioned. Or he was mistaken for a deer by someone with the same calibre rifle....

Tom: A freak accident?! That must have been such a shock.

Rachel: Yes. It was. It felt as if my world was ending. But the kids needed me to be strong. So, I was.

Tom: Your children.... Are they here with you?

Rachel: No, they're adults now. Ethan's still at uni - finishing a law degree. Emma's a nurse. You wouldn't like their politics – they're both anti-firearm lefties.

Tom: Maybe not surprising? Given the loss of their dad....

Rachel: It's not the gun that's the problem. It's the person holding it. *(Pause)* But enough of my history.... Let's have a toast. To risk-takers!

Tom: Risk-takers?

Rachel: Well, both of us are gambling with our lives, aren't we? I open my doors in the middle of a storm to an armed assassin, or potential rapist. You enter the home of a possible serial killer...

Tom: *(laughing)* You don't look like a serial killer.

Rachel: How can you tell?

Tom: You don't have crazed eyes!

Rachel: That's a relief...

Tom: And, despite the rifle, I hope I'm not giving off a violent, dangerous vibe...

Rachel: No, not on first impression.

Tom: So not a huge risk, then...

Rachel: I guess not. But the news was so weird. First, the body of a missing tramper was found at a nearby stream.

Tom: Murdered?!

Rachel: The police haven't said yet, but what if he **was** killed? It's a bit close to home. And now Neil's gone missing as well...

Tom: Neil?

Rachel: The local publican. You must know him – the tall guy with the massive red beard.

Tom: And the big personality?

Rachel: Yes, he's pretty unforgettable. A very experienced bushman. It's out of character for him to disappear.

Tom: Maybe he just went on a bender? And is taking shelter somewhere now the storm's hit? He must know these hills like the back of his hand.

Rachel: Unlike him to miss the regular pool competition on a Friday night...

Tom: That is odd. He's in his element with the weekend punters – quite the raconteur! He's a great guy!

Rachel: I'm not a fan. A bit gropey for me.

Tom: Surely not. He's married, isn't he?

Rachel: Sue's got to be the most long-suffering woman I know. Neil's a shocker. A total flirt. Worse when he's been drinking. Far too touchy feely.

Tom: I'm struggling to see him as a sexual predator. He's probably just being overly friendly.

Rachel: Are you minimising my experience?

Tom: Sorry?

Rachel: But then you were quite quick to put your hands on me when I was in the kitchen.

Tom: What are you talking about?

Rachel: You're probably just like Neil. Think you can molest any woman at will. I bet Sue will be thrilled when Neil turns up dead.

Tom: What's going on here? Are you completely nuts?

Rachel: *(moving to Tom's gun and picking it up as she speaks)* Of course. Blame the woman. Make out she's crazy. Take no responsibility for your abuse.

Tom: Put that gun down!

Rachel: And it's loaded. How convenient. *(She points the gun at him.)* You've made it so easy for me.