

Ross and Beth

by
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INT. MILKING SHED - EARLY MORNING

The screen is black. Titles rise:

ROSS AND BETH

As the titles fade a sound emerges, dull and repetitive - WHUMP -- WHUMP -- WHUMP. A bird calls out, followed moments later by a voice, clear and warm:

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

The Tui. Radio New Zealand
National - it's six am.

The screen fades in to reveal a jam jar quarter full with milky tea. A thermos is drawn up to the jar and more tea is poured in. As it fills, something green and sloppy slaps down beside the jar. Some of it splashes into the tea.

BETH

Shit.

BETH, 68, stands in a narrow milking shed pit, closed in on both sides by rows of steaming cows. The thump of the milking machine means nothing less than a shout can be heard. Beth tips out the poo-tainted tea and refills.

BETH

Tea's here.

Three cows down from Beth is ROSS, 70. As he removes milking cups from a set of teats, he gives a brief glance up in acknowledgement before getting back to work. Beth does the same, but talks in sporadic bursts as she works. Despite shouting, her words still need subtitling.

BETH

Margaret said she'd give us a
bell today. Think she got back to
London last night. Be nice to
hear what Spain was like.

Ross shows no indication that he's listening to Beth; she doesn't appear bothered either way. Outside a dog bounces around, noiselessly herding cows towards the shed.

INT. ROSS AND BETH'S KITCHEN - MORNING

The kitchen table is covered haphazardly in newspapers and unopened envelopes. In amongst it all is a bowl of sugar, a teapot covered in a crocheted cosy and two cups of tea. Despite the shambles the room feels comfortable.

Beth, in her bowling whites, crochets a black and white beanie whilst continuing her on-off one way conversation. Ross, in a shit-covered singlet full of holes, watches his paddock out the window.

BETH

They're a funny bunch, these young ones coming through. Some good bowlers amongst them. One looks promising. Prepared to listen. Not like most of them.

ROSS

For fuck's sake.

Beth looks up to find Ross still staring out the window.

ROSS'S P.O.V: 50 metres away a battered old ute is parked beside their paddock. Ross and Beth watch as a Maori family of four climb the fence and start pulling up puha plants and shoving them into sacks. Beth gets back to her crochet.

BETH

Should pop out and say hello.

ROSS

Like fuck.

In the distance we see the man straighten up and look over to the house. He waves out. Beth waves back immediately. Despite his apparent annoyance, Ross begrudgingly throws his hand up as well.

BETH

Tell them to go away if it bothers you so much. Grumpy shit.

A slight smile passes over Ross's face - the first we've seen from him.

BETH
You don't even eat puha.

ROSS
It's a weed.

BETH
So they're doing us a favour
then.

Ross ignores her and continues watching out the window.
Finally his interest wanes and he turns back inside.

ROSS
What's that?

BETH
A beanie hat.

ROSS
Who for?

BETH
My boyfriend.

Ross watches her for a while. He then turns and looks out
the window again.

ROSS
Stupid prick.

INT. MILKING SHED - EARLY MORNING

The thump of the milking machine fades in. A bird calls out
once more, followed by the same announcer's voice.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
The piwakawaka, or fantail. Radio
New Zealand National - it's six
am.

Ross and Beth are busy removing milking cups. Beth appears
to be revisiting her previous conversation with herself.
Once again, she's subtitled.

BETH

She must have meant Saturday coming. Could still be on holiday. Never know, might have herself a young Spanish boy. Hope she got rid of that useless pom anyway, the one with the earrings. He sounded bloody useless.

Ross continues to work in silence with his back to Beth. After a beat, Beth removes the cups from the final cow. Seamlessly, and without needing to turn around, Ross pulls on a rope which releases the exit gate. The cows amble out.

Ross and Beth both wipe their hands on their overalls, then reach for their jars of tea at the same time as the dog silently herds the next lot in. Neither of them is aware of their perfect synchronicity.

INT. ROSS AND BETH'S KITCHEN - MORNING

The kitchen table looks much the same, with spilt sugar and newspapers strewn across it. Beth, once again in her whites, puts the finishing chains into the black and white beanie, while Ross nurses his tea and watches his paddock.

ROSS

The tribe's back.

ROSS'S P.O.V: The ute and the Maori family are parked up again and climbing the fence into the paddock. The father, a big man, negotiates the fence. As he swings his leg over, it catches in the wire and he tumbles to the ground.

ROSS

Fat one's fallen over.

BETH

Thankyou for the updates.

Beth stops her crochet for a moment, winces and touches at her chest, but soon resumes stitching. Oblivious, Ross maintains lookout. After a few beats, Beth puts down her crochet hooks and holds up the completed beanie to admire.

BETH

Done.

Ross turns away from the window to look. He regards it for a moment, then gives Beth a small nod of acknowledgement.

BETH

My boyfriend's going to love it.

Beth heads out of the kitchen before Ross can give a response. He watches her go, another hint of a smile on his face. When she's out of sight he returns his attention to the paddock. As his smile slowly dies...

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

The thrum of heavy rain beating down steadily intensifies. As it reaches a crescendo --

FADE IN on Ross, soaked and uncomfortable in a tie, with his shirt sleeves rolled up. He watches a coffin being lowered into the ground. His daughter MARGARET (35) stands beside him, crying. Holding her is a SMOOTH LOOKING MAN WITH EARRINGS.

EXT. CEMETERY - LATER

People file past Ross and Margaret, paying their respects. Margaret and her boyfriend both embrace people freely. Ross hugs women awkwardly, preferring the solid handshakes of the men. The tail of his damp shirt hangs out at the back.

Off to the side, the puha picking family stand over the grave, quiet and with their heads bowed.

INT. MILKING SHED - MORNING

The screen fades in to the familiar thump of the milking machine. The radio is still playing, but it's much hazier than before. Ross toils away in the pit, replacing cups. Outside, the iron grey sky threatens to burst.

INT. MILKING SHED - LATER

Ross releases the gate for the first lot of cows. They're reluctant to go and it takes some furious, out-of-character barks from the dog to get them moving. The radio is now just static noise.

INT. LAUNDRY - DAY

Ross takes his old singlet off and throws it in a laundry basket overflowing with dirty clothes. He puts on a newer singlet, still holey but with far less cow shit on it.

EXT. ROSS AND BETH'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Ross tucks his fresh singlet in and tidies himself up as he heads out to Margaret at the front gate. He gives her a hug and shakes her boyfriend's hand before they climb into their rental. Margaret winds down the passenger window.

MARGARET

I'll call when we get to London.

ROSS

Righto.

Ross watches them drive off. As they fade from view, he remains bolted to the same spot - motionless, lost. After a long period of silence, he finally trudges inside.

INT. ROSS AND BETH'S KITCHEN - AFTERNOON

Ross sits at the freshly cleared kitchen table with a cuppa. Envelopes sit neatly stacked in one corner. Placed prominently in the middle is a shiny new kettle, emblazoned in Union Jack colours. Everything looks wrong.

ROSS'S P.O.V: The paddock is empty of cows and puha picking Maori families.

INT/EXT. MILKING SHED - AFTERNOON

Ross hoses down the shed. As he turns the water off, the sound of a vehicle is heard.

Ross watches from the shed as two of the puha pickers, MERV (45) and his son CORY (15), make their way to the door of the house. Cory carries a big pot. After knocking and waiting, Cory puts the pot down under the porch. He and his father head back to their ute and they drive away.

EXT. ROSS AND BETH'S HOUSE - LATER

Ross kicks his gumboots off as he inspects the contents of the pot. Inside is a boil-up of pork bones and puha.

INT. ROSS AND BETH'S KITCHEN - EVENING

Ross takes the lid off the boil-up pot and peers in, contemplative. He goes over to the stove and gives the starter knob a twist. Nothing. He fiddles a bit more, tries to get it clicking. Still no luck. Frustrated, Ross gives up, turns the water jug on and heads out.

INT. MILKING SHED - MORNING

The screen is black. As the thump of the milking machine fades in again, a bird calls out, and the same warm voice follows:

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

The pipiwharauoa, or shining
cuckoo. Radio New Zealand
National. It's six am.

A bright morning sun peeks through holes in the milking shed walls. Ross is herding the first lot of cows into the stalls. The dog is back to bouncing noiselessly around in support. As Ross starts attaching the first lot of cups, a sound breaks his concentration. He looks up to see Cory standing at the top of the pit. He shouts over the noise.

CORY

Morning.

ROSS

Aye?

CORY

I said morning.

ROSS

Morning.

There's a pause as they both size each other up.

CORY

Need a hand?

ROSS

Aye?

CORY

Do you want a hand - with the milking?

ROSS

Nah, you're right.

CORY

The old man said you'd say no.
Told me to ignore you.

Cory joins him in the pit. Taking the aisle opposite Ross, he begins attaching cups to the first cow. It's obvious he's done this before.

ROSS

Why'd you ask then?

CORY

Polite.

Ross watches Cory for a while, thrown. Eventually he gets back to his side of the shed. They work in silence.

INT. MILKING SHED - LATER

They're still removing and reattaching cups in silence. As Cory works he hums and shuffles around, dancing in a low-key way to a song in his head. Ross appears perturbed by this. Cory pauses for a moment and looks up from his work.

CORY

This radio station's shit.

ROSS

What?

CORY
The radio station. No songs. Can
I change it?

ROSS
Nup.

Cory watches Ross for a while, then gets back to work.

INT. MILKING SHED - LATER

The first rows have been herded out, and Cory watches the dog enthusiastically bouncing the next herd in.

CORY
Your dog's lost it's voice.

Ross ignores him and leaves the pit to give the dog a hand.

CORY
What's it's name?

ROSS
Jock.

CORY
Jock. Jockeys. Like the undies.

Cory gets another look. Ross isn't laughing.

CORY
Get in behind Undies! Get in
behind!

Ross, annoyed, shuts the gates on the cows loudly and starts reattaching cups. Cory eventually joins him.

INT. MILKING SHED - LATER

They're both working silently again aside from Cory's incessant humming and shuffling. Ross appears slightly more comfortable with it all. Cory looks ready for another chat.

CORY
So you play bowls as well?

Ross continues working as he speaks.

ROSS

What?

CORY

Lawn Bowls. You play?

ROSS

Not anymore.

CORY

Why?

ROSS

Knees.

CORY

They had it?

ROSS

Yep.

CORY

Should get you some new ones. My old man's on the waiting list for a knee replacement. He's got a real bad limp.

Ross continues working for a beat.

ROSS

Wouldn't help being fat.

It takes a moment for Ross to realise this might have caused offence. He looks up at Cory, unsure of what to say next. Eventually Cory gives a laugh.

CORY

True.

He gets back to work. Ross follows suit.

INT. MILKING SHED - LATER

The milking is done for the morning and Cory hoses down the shed. Ross looks like he's got nothing to do. To keep busy he rolls up a strand of loose baling twine, taking the odd sip from his jar of tea. Cory shuts the hose off.

CORY

That it?

ROSS

Should be.

Cory watches Ross for a moment as he finishes his tea. A smile emerges.

CORY

When you pissed your wife off,
she used to drop a little bit of
cowshit in your tea.

This stops Ross in his tracks. He stops what he's doing and looks at Cory, who's putting his beanie on. It's black and white.

CORY

She was hardcase your wife.

Ross recognises the beanie.

CORY

Tomorrow then?

A moment's silence.

ROSS

Yep.

CORY

Sweet. Later.

Cory jumps on his bike and pedals off into the sunrise. Ross watches him go. There's a hint of a smile.

THE END