

We Are Always At Your Service

by Niven Govinden

We've become a town of pregnant women. A journalist wrote a story about some forgotten old wives tales for a Sunday magazine and unwittingly opened the floodgates. Now our offices, guest houses and stores are packed with baby bumps.

They come here for the water. Something in its chalky, almost oily-tasting properties acting as a jump-starter to sluggish reproductive organs. We've welcomed newlyweds but mostly they come without husbands, these modern women, who figure that the other key constituent, a healthy XY chromosome, can also be found at source, our town of the springs.

Some of us are judgemental people but we are mindful to keep our opinions within the privacy of our homes and those of our closest. Mostly we are thankful for the ring of cash registers and the opportunity to be hospitable and share the beauty of the mountains.

This has been a two year windfall. Week after week of seeing suitcases and trolleys set down at the bus terminus. The arrival of city cars, so dinky and ill-equipped as if they were toy models, parked outside previously neglected family-run hotels. Woman upon woman, leaving behind the dust bowls of their home towns and bitter, frazzled relationships, to embark on a much-needed, hopeful experiment.

As a consequence, we too have adapted. Skills have had to be learned such as how to keep house when opening to paying lodgers; how to negotiate favourable weekly terms; and the ability to deliver clear, precise directions for

those sometimes bold, impatient strangers, not yet familiar with our streets, nor assimilated into our slow pace of life.

For the boys who are mountain born and raised, their sudden demand with desirable females is nothing short of fortuitous, and could only be attributed to God. Every one of our young men from the ages of 18 to 25 has found themselves in demand at some point. From stocky cattle hands in their prime, to the basketball team, to the runts of the litter, those sickly and bespectacled specimens who are more likely to be found in a library than a football field. There were also, scandal-seeking commentators insinuated, younger benefactors, pointing to certain well-developed 15 year olds looking more self-satisfied than they had any right to be. But this was babble we chose to ignore.

It was something from the realm of comic books watching these women waiting outside barn-housed cotillions and graduation dances in their hire cars during those early months. They were looking to make sophisticated introductions with boys so drunk from beer they were unable to tell night from day. Enduring clumsy manoeuvres in the pine forest where needles pricked through cashmere and scratched expensive leather bags. Breathing through acidic, vomit-stained kisses in order to have their way. Other times they could be found parked up on the mountain road after learning that it was used as a short cut by most of the foresters to the supply store, and tapping nails into their rear tyres. They were nothing short of ingenious, these ladies.

At first there were no complaints from those lucky enough to sow their oats with a different visitor each week and still make it to the family table for mealtimes. It was like finding gold in the middle of lush pasture; bonus after

bonus. Strikingly, there was no jealousy to be had among their peers due to the constant stream of spring tasters. They were bamboozled with too much choice to argue over or get sentimental about any particular conquest. You wanted a blonde? You got it. Had a thing for flat chests? Step this way.

We saw no reason to begrudge any local son their good fortune. Showed no judgement, bar a gentle tutting and some rueful contemplation on how our learning of certain bedroom practices could have been so different had such a claim about the spring been made in the dusk of our own adolescence.

Only a dyed in the wool curmudgeon would find something to complain about. All the more so because we've always prided ourselves on being a decent community who looked out for their own. We never shied away from our responsibilities once we were aware of what was happening, calling on the town notary to draft a contract of non-liability, designed to spare all potential fathers the spectre of crippling financial commitments.

So if both our blessed mountain soil, and muscle and bone were as powerfully fertile as suggested, what harm could there be in putting our young bucks out to stud? It was only when the boys started to complain of being tired and missed appointments that heckles began to rise.

We had become comfortable, you see; those of us who'd raised such fine and able boys; or who worked at the spring itself; or who had entrepreneurial interests in that area; or whose vocations were catering and hospitality. We'd become hooked on profit and were greedy for the spoils: our flat screen televisions and SUVs, our kitchen modernisations and over-embellished gardens.

The history of this town has long been one of scrimp and save: of libraries without books; and monuments crumbling to dust. We admit to our initial spendthrift craziness. Buying indiscriminately and clearing store shelves like squirrel-eating hillbillies. All that is plastic, resin and leather-look filled our baskets. Anything that would immediately date was ours. In hindsight, most of these tacky purchases shame us. Those that can be hidden now reside in basements and garages never to be seen again. The rest are shielded by hen houses or topiary.

But lesson learned, we remain drawn to spending, albeit personal or civic, as if to create an arsenal of souvenirs, to commemorate that time when our town had it good. As if, at the back of our minds was always the knowledge that this wouldn't last. Yes, there would always childless women let down by men who physically ached for a child, just as there were young dumb bucks to inseminate them. What we feared would disappear was the magic of the town; that the myth of the spring would be usurped by something more spectacular in a far away place alien to our own. We couldn't prevent a shift in public tastes, or the need for certain Sunday magazines to write about the next big thing, but we could control our assets.

So the weariness of the boys was silently noted at first, because we were conscious of being sympathetic but not pandering. Our country was built upon hard work and they had been raised to follow these same principles. But like we said, some of them started to miss appointments, leaving disappointed, unfertilised tourists, which in turn generated early check-outs from guest houses, forcing us to get punitive. Strict curfews were set and when these were broken, deliberately, instantly, they were grounded. When

this too was disregarded – the boys meeting in secret to get drunk and commiserate in a space wholly free of female hormones - we locked them in our homes in a trial spell of house arrest. Their only leave was granted for school or college classes and pre-arranged visits to the women.

In our defence, we were worried, both for the future of our unconventional industry and our reputation amongst the people who matter: the big guns of specialist tourism, the State chamber of commerce, and website satisfaction ratings. We remained decisive in the face of all fears and small rebellions. We would not barter with tears or threats. We shut our hearts to it and concentrated on the business.

Only, we were so caught up in the goldmines that were our sons that we completely neglected our daughters. So busy were we in locking away any corrosive thoughts in our rush to bank profits, we were unaware of how deeply they too were affected and of their growing resentment towards us.

It was all of our own making, how there were no football captains to have crushes on, or college dropouts to get dangerous with. They were no longer wolf-whistled by boys in passing cars, or asked to dances and beer keggers in the woods. The new women went to those. The local girls were unworldly and cumbersome; attractive to no one with their scrubbed, expectant faces and their misunderstood silences. When they did speak, it was their habit of asking difficult questions in tones which were both incredulous and entirely sensible. That was their most unappealing trait of all.

How can such an enterprise sustain, they asked? What will come first: moral bankruptcy or STDs? How must it feel to be grandparents to so many children you may never get to know?

This was the product of our encouragement: distant progeny unaware of their family. Most likely they would be the only kind of grandchildren ever delivered to us, because now the boys had been spoiled, even taking into account their lack of energy and enthusiasm for the project, they would probably never settle down with a local girl; their position descending from unbelievable luck, to novelty, to millstone in eighteen short months.

And what it did mean for them, our girls, who still had their dreams to fulfil and goodness to offer? To have the freedom of the streets, and rare sightings of their young men held under lock and key? Their innocence evaporating into the clouds whilst at the base of the hills, the spring continued to gush its beneficial nutrients and wild, wild hope.

They looked around at what we had foolishly created: a town that had no place for its own daughters. Where teenage secrecy and commonsense was unfairly pitted against the swell of the desperate, virile, and greedy.

Whether they stayed or left meant little to us. We'd agonise over it later – for a generation, in fact. But whilst the fad was here, we would kill ourselves to ride it, blindsided to all else. For now, we had the women, and bed-linen needed changing before the next busload arrived.