

OFF TRACK



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Dedicated to Kiwi Opa



At the end of year nine at high school, Camille's life changed. She had drifted away from her school friends after a close schoolmate turned the group against her. With no one to turn to, the situation seemed insurmountable to a teen. She felt she couldn't talk to anyone. Parents would not understand – who tells parents anyway? Friends were not speaking, brother – not an option.

She searched for solutions, casting out feelers far and wide. Misery congregates, and she found what she thought was her solution – friendship with less favourable characters. Introducing her to more alcohol and new drugs. The start of a downward spiral.

As year ten arrived her mind was a mess. School was a place of pain. A struggle. Out of school was an escape but she contemplated consequences. She was in inner turmoil. She fought constantly with her parents, and *wagged* more and more classes. Late was an excuse that her bike had a flat tyre, or the chain broke. Skipping a few hours, then whole days. The spiral continued.

Her parents noticed deterioration in her school grades and tried to be stern. But what was enough, what was too much? Parenting is never easy. One brief decision can change a life. And then it did.

* * *

One night, following a short, trivial fight with her parents, they told her to go to her room. She went to her room, and didn't stop. Slipped out of the ground floor window and up the road and onward. Hiding whenever a car approached, and making use of walkways between streets. She made her way to a park where she slept for the night.

Off Track

For a teen harsh conditions aren't much, love is difficult, forgiveness worse, and freedom everything. Freedom to live with yourself without any boundaries. No accountability. No rules. No expectations. Camille moved down a track that many thought of, but didn't dare.

* * *

Peter and his wife were besides themselves. Their fourteen year old girl was gone. Missing. He wished he never said those words. "Go to your room!" A child leaving your custody is the worst thing anyone could wish on a parent. The questions: "Why?" - "Where did we go wrong?" - "Is she okay, is she alive even?" Fear and panic set in hard.

Prayer group colleagues rallied around, keeping a vigil, helping with the search, taking turns at prayer as the days turned into weeks.

* * *

A couple of days went by alone. Then it was discovered she was around.

They said, "You're like us - we know where you're at". She had met a group of street kids.

They all had reasons for leaving. Some big, some small. She felt at home. Camaraderie and the lifestyle that went with it; they introduced her to the colours and the numbness of substance abuse; warming her against the elements and her own mind.

She sank into a darkness. One she didn't want to come out of. She was a girl *Off Track*.

Days went by. Camille didn't go home.

Off Track

She slept in park play forts, under-bridges, carparks, sometimes broke into schools in harsher weather, wherever there was shelter. Sometimes alone sometimes with one or more of the group.

The kids on the street became a family. They killed time together, walked the streets together, visited friends together, found refuge together in the evenings. Got high together. Begged together. Ate the spoils together. There was a relief of acceptance no matter what, no standards, no peer pressure, and a relief of not having to meet anyone's expectations. As long as no one found her, cared for her, looked for her, she had nothing to live up to. She just wanted to drift away into a state where nothing mattered and no one cared.

Thursdays were dole days, handouts, and the kids over 18 got alcohol for the group. Then soon after, all was gone. Sometimes the alcohol lasted to Friday night, but it was always clear, that money was strictly for alcohol - not for food...They all begged, "just a dollar...you got a dollar?" A dollar bought a huge bag of chips from the local fish and chip shop, and that, along with occasional spoils from shoplifting, they all lived. But shoplifting was reserved for glue. Worth the risk. And had to be.

Friends introduced her to a drop-in centre, where they got free coffee when needed, free-for-all Fridays. Occasionally they cleaned up at the drop-in centre staff's homes. Talk about 'beyond the call of duty', the staff were all Christians, lived by their faith, lived the word.

* * *

Peter never stopped looking for his daughter. Every lead he would follow. But initially, nothing worked. They kept praying.

* * *

A true friend come guardian angel arrived in the manager, Esther. She was there when there was crisis, and when not. She did not judge or preach, just listened, offered coffee, and encouraged reform. She talked to Camille and they agreed she would speak to her parents. Just to let them know she was alive and with friends. She put a seed of hope in Camille's mind.

The support didn't immediately help. She was in a dark space – she wanted to be free. Free from obligation; free from guilt; free from pain. Free. She just so wished no one would care. The freedom of no one to worry about. She knew her parents would be beside themselves. It hurt. Esther and the volunteers at the drop-in centre cared a lot. But she just wished NO ONE WOULD CARE.

Her parents' worry deepened the longer she was gone, and the longer she was gone, the less she felt she could come home. Too much pain, too much guilt. Peter found her sometimes, a report of her seen on a main road, a glimpse at the mall etc., he would drive madly up to find her, but on arrival he knew, from her demeanor, if he took her home she wouldn't stay. She hated disappointing him, but dark thoughts took over, escape, self hate, self worth – zero, she just could not face home.

She stopped past home now and then to get some things when she was sure no one was home. She didn't have a key but the louvre windows were unbelievably simple to remove and replace on exit. She wasn't sure if they knew she had been there but also didn't really care. They were at work, she needed things.

Then one day, one of the friends suggested a trip North. Sounds like fun. Why not?

Hitchhiking Northbound, a group of the kids found their way from point to point, sometimes stopping at friends, sometimes sleeping out. It was fun. Every new place, a new perspective. They felt like the *famous five*. Adventure, no rules, no limits.

The small town of their destination was *not* what they expected. Fewer places to hide. More patrols.

It seemed like five minutes after arrival, busted. Loitering with intent; a jail cell for the night. Not told why or how long. Was loitering even a crime? The police, given their age, made a call, DFS on their way. The kids didn't know it, but they were on their way back to the juvenile detention facilities and foster homes they had run away from months before.

But for Camille, this would be a turning point. A change in trajectory. Movement towards a somewhat *parallel track*.

* * *

The first few days in detention, the girls gave her the cold shoulder – tolerating but not friends. Looked down on. Then she tried to make a break for it one night, through the fire escape, a short stint, but suddenly she was admired by the inmates: “This skinny bitch has guts” they said. Extra penalty duties, but so worth it... She struggled with the thought patterns.

Her parents never gave up trying to help, but they knew home was not an option.

Learning that Camille was in a detention centre, but would be released if there was a viable option for her, they reached out: praying and calling on all their friends that had rallied around in support over the past very hard months.

A ray of light in the darkness – a friend called.

They'd found a half-way house in the Southern suburbs. Chellevah. The girls there had been through everything imaginable. They were tough, yet turned around. Arora, the woman managing the house, was comforting yet stern, young but calm. Peter immediately warmed to her, suddenly feeling everything would be okay. It was a hard sell, there were limited spots, and normally they took over 18s, but Peter's pastor took up the matter as Camille's advocate, and following more prayer she was accepted.

For the first time since running away, outside the family and friendship of the street kids, Camille felt at home. Accepted, welcomed, loved, a sense of companionship. Cooking and cleaning, strolls in the large grounds, drawing and writing, family (for that is what it grew to be) dinners, and generally feeling worthy. With the arrival of Mary and her four year old - a single mother and the only other one of the group who didn't work, active fun-filled days followed. They looked after the house and kept Camille occupied, on a subtle, yet profound level.

She loved the time with the girls, but sometimes the call of freedom was strong. Once she just left. Solvents called. She just wanted the numbness of no care. A life of no commitment, no accountability. And she ran – into the city. When the police eventually picked her up. The girls understood – everyone falls off the wagon sometime. They welcomed her back. No questions.

The second time peer pressure loomed. She met some guys on a training course during her early days at the group home, older by a few years, dole age. They turned up with a car and alcohol. She didn't look back, no one looking out, she was gone. Too much alcohol, too much glue, stumbling – trying to get

back home thinking no one would notice, a highly inebriated Camille ended up in detention again. Arora picked her up. No judgement – just, “– is this what you really want?”

She finally realised people cared, the girls, the centre staff, but critically her family. They weren't judging, they weren't blaming, they just cared. There was another life. She didn't need the darkness, numbness, guilt; and her family were open arms forgiveness – prodigal daughter, no questions, no conditions.

* * *

One weekend visit home, Peter was ecstatic. Over the moon. As she came to him and said, “I want to sit my year 10 exams”. He knew it was another turning point. Peter was confident she would succeed – he ultimately believed in his daughter and realised what a significant breakthrough Chellevah had been. How much the people in her life had helped. If only they knew. But deep down he suspected they would do it anyway, even if they never saw the reward.

Attending school was not an option for Camille. In fact it would be impossible, her expulsion and past track record had been communicated to all the local colleges and no one would have her. Regardless of any reformation. She suggested putting herself through year 10. A debt one could never repay went out to a family friend from church, Mr G. He put his neck out to allow her to sit the exams at his college, garnered by her parents' faith. In the life of a teen, teachers have the capacity for a profound positive or negative effect on young lives. It is a calling that should be taken more significantly than the way it currently is. Mr G made a difference. That one big difference.

The life paths started to converge.

It was 1990 and there was no internet for the masses. She

worked from text books, which she had gathered, vaguely understood, at the beginning of the year before her expulsion. Whenever there was a question, Mr. G was there and exceedingly helpful.

She repaid their faith by passing, and with not less than an A minus in all three subjects she attempted. After beginning the year in September, everyone was so very proud and so very relieved.

After passing year ten, Camille told her parents of her life long dream to become a pilot. Despite all the confidence they had in her, she felt too embarrassed to tell them until the desire beat out the fear. From then on, while it was not smooth sailing, she found a purpose and renewed love of life.

* * *

AND THEN

Camille, while finishing her school qualifications, primarily the four subjects in year 11 required for entrance into the Air Force, got a job waitressing. While she passed the theoretical part of the interview, she failed the practical, primarily nerves.

She thought "I'm out of options" and then later, after the sting wore off "-or am I?"

In the interim, through her waitressing income she had begun taking flying lessons privately. And she now realised, to reach her dreams, the Air Force may not be the only way.

She kept flying. Pay check to flight school. Very little left over. At one point McDonalds and BP had a campaign for free hamburgers with ever 20\$ of petrol, and driving to the airfield

was faaarrrr...quite unhealthy but for a while she lived on McDonalds. Despite the hunger of being on the streets, she remained a vegetarian all those years, so hamburgers without the burger were always ordered and primary diet for a bit.

Whenever someone asked her if she wanted to become a commercial pilot, she replied, "I want to keep flying until I either run out of money or stop enjoying it!", secretly fearing the first would happen first.

Concurrently with flying, a friend suggested tertiary as a good back-up option. With favourable government options for subsidies due to her parent's financial situation, she completed her a degree in mechanical engineering, moving from waitress to engineering intern. To her delight, the increase in money meant she could afford more lessons!

In 1994, she completed her commercial license and instructors rating and told her parents of another dream. Long subdued.

Flying in the vast and inspiring landscapes of Africa – a bush pilot.

As was the case throughout her life, her parents supported her, and like they did with all her dreams, they went on a rollercoaster of fear and pride. Worried about a single white female, barely an adult, traipsing through Africa alone, yet proud of her and wishing her success, acknowledging her achievement.

Camille followed the path of pilot stories – where to find a job as a new entrant in the field. Then, not in the first country, but to her amazement, the second, she managed to find a job, progressing to become a fully fledged bush pilot, the job of her imagination came to life.

Off Track

She moved through the ranks, and to her surprise and overwhelming sense of achievement – job satisfaction - pride, eventually an airline pilot flying wide body jets. Bush flying on African Safaris was everything she imagined and more, as was corporate, contract, and airline, and every other step in the path. She loved every minute of her chosen career, and her life—once very far off track, was progressing to ones of her dreams.

On the radio one day, she very unexpectedly married a love at first hear (...at first they spoke). An air traffic controller. They met after the day's flying making a bet, to see each other again in ten years. This marked the start of a new chapter in life. Planned, but originally not, seeing how happy they were, they brought two children into the family. She vowed to always be a friend to them, to make sure they could tell her anything, everything.

Always passionate about writing, she began writing books as a hobby, come second income – charter and airline work kept long hours followed by long breaks, and soon she had a publishing business.

A successful airline career, a happy family, a business, and considerable financial security, all stemming from people who believed in her and gave her a chance.

Initially so far *Off Track*, Camille's trajectory was now legendary.

* * *

Camille never forgot the people that helped her return from the brink of chaos. Esther, Arora, Mr. G, and especially Dad, - the small steps taken by each made a huge difference in her life. One never knows how much your actions mean to someone else, both positive and negative.

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