

When water is no longer there

He was a big bloke, six-foot plus, young, heavily built; not the sort you give bad looks to. But I couldn't help myself – he was doing something beyond my ken: his trolley was chokka with bottles of soda water and nothing else.

If he noticed me glaring, he didn't blink. I used a stage whisper (a loud one) to ask the checkout people if this kind of behaviour was unusual? "Nah," they laughed. "We ran out of bottled water this morning (it was now 5.30). People have moved on to sparkling. Soon we'll have none at all."

As I left (with no water, and no intentions of getting any) the supermarket entrance was awash with panic talk about the water crisis that hit New Plymouth after ex-Cyclone Gita.

I'd heard about it mid-morning, word-of-mouth from someone who'd got it via phone from a friend who'd heard something on radio news. By the time the information filtered to me the memo was a bit like the ones that emerged from a whispering game we played at boys club. You passed a message around a big circle to see what emerged after 100 exchanges. "Tomorrow's meeting is at 8am" became "the marrow's seeping with jam".

I got something about a water shortage caused by a tree hitting a water pipe. First reaction: how could a water pipe be hit by a falling tree? Aren't water pipes underground? Oh well, the tap still flowed, I thought, as I got a glass of water from the filter tap. No danger there (actually there was, I found out later).

The supermarket trip was worrying. Could this be more serious than I thought? I'd been listening to low volume jazz all day while writing, a task not conducive to radio prattle. I've turned off all computer device notifications because they drive me to distraction. I have the civil defence warning one enabled on my phone, but I wasn't aware of anything from that quarter until 8.39pm on Wednesday evening, when we got a warning about possibly contaminated water. Bit late, I thought.

The reason I didn't drive round looking for bottled water was we already a couple of big containers stored away for just such an eventuality. No problems. But then, big problem – where had I stored them? A search of sheds and wardrobes and cupboards proved fruitless. An hour later, I was in my workshop looking for something else when it occurred to me: I'd put the containers in an old broken-down under-bench fridge.

I'd also filled a couple of buckets the day the storm hit, just in case. So, after the kettle used a small fortune in power making water safe, its button having to be held down for the requisite minute (which goes on forever), we looked set for drinking water and cleaning our teeth.

There were other unresolved matters, though. Would the dishwasher safely clean the dishes? No advice offered on that. Could we have a shower? Firstly, was there enough water for that and flushing the loo? And if you were allowed to shower, how did you stop water getting in your mouth? The obvious answer isn't quite there when you have a beard.

Were we even in an area where the supply was compromised? Initial news of the affected and non-affected areas was as vague as the whispering game's best outcomes. An online map on the New Plymouth District Council website seemed useless at first because of the zone colours laid over it obscured street and suburb names.

By accident that night, when looking up the latest news about the emergency, we discovered the map was inter-active. When you put your finger on it, the status colour disappeared and you could identify afflicted areas. We seemed to be in the clear, but boiling would be needed for a week.

I wonder how you fared if you don't have access to the internet? Or only primitive knowledge of how interactive maps work? I guess you drank lots of beer and straight gin, hoping with the latter that you'd made the ice cubes with "previous" water and not the aftermath version.

JT column for Sat March 3 2018 – water crisis

I'm picking the mayor will be pleased with all this once he gets the city back to normal. During the election campaign, he rightly made a fuss about the last council's neglect of water supply future needs. I'd further bet water has now surpassed zero waste as ratepayers' greatest concern.