

TZE (NGĀ-TAI) WEE

The Peach and the Sky

Tao laid in bed staring at an old black and white photo of his mother; twirling a little peach-shaped jade pendant between his fingers; a gift given to him by his mother. Tao's name meant peach in Chinese, he was given the name by his mother; as a baby, he was a chubby and sweet little thing, now, a young 17-year-old man; slim, gaunt and bitter. Tao closed his eyes trying to remember the sweet, fragrant aroma of orange blossoms whenever his mother walked into the room, how gently she spoke, even when angered, her hands; soft and warm against his cheeks as she placed a tender kiss on his forehead. Tao thought of these memories religiously every morning, it made him feel closer to his mother even though they were oceans apart.

It had been a good year since Tao and his father moved over to New Zealand from South China; overpopulation, land shortages, famine and drought caused many Chinese to migrate to this strange far away land.

Tao got up out of bed and headed for the kitchen; a warm bowl of congee greeting his growling stomach. He quickly threw on a fresh pair of shorts and a t-shirt, and headed out the front door of his house arriving at the back of the shop. Tao and his father owned a fruit and veggie shop; it took a good six months mining down south in the Otago goldfields, slaving away and saving up every penny they could make to open the shop; a dream of his father's.

Tao could hear grunting and mumbling coming from outside, he popped his head out to see what was happening. Tao saw his father with a pail of water and a dirty rag, trying to scrub off some writing on the shops wall, "*Chink*."

Tao had been in New Zealand long enough to pick up the English language along with a few Māori phrases here and there; he knew that "*Chink*" was not a desirable word.

"Ah yah... This is the fifth time this week..." sighed Tao's father.

"Bāba, let me do it, the delivery will be arriving soon."

Tao grabbed the dirty rag off his father and began scrubbing, Tao's father went inside the shop to prepare for opening.

Tao had his ulterior motives for wanting to be outside; every morning Mr. Kingi and his son would arrive with fresh fruits and veggies for the shop. Tao didn't care much for fresh fruits and veggies, he just wanted to see Mr. Kingi's son; his tanned olive skin, piercing green eyes, thick dark hair, Tao of course never spoke to Mr. Kingi's son, he was always too shy, he'd rather admire from afar. He heard from his father that Mr. Kingi and his family moved up these ways three months ago from who-knows-where.

"Kia ora!" shouted Mr. Kingi, startling Tao from his daydreaming.

"Ah kia ora," Tao replied.

As soon as Tao saw Mr. Kingi's son, he quickly turned his attention back to scrubbing, too nervous to look at the handsome young man walking by carrying crates of apples, his toned arms bulging from its weight. They left as quickly as they came.

Tao went back into the shop, "Tao! Hurry!!! Hurry up they're leaving!"

Tao's father shoved a little toki shaped pounamu into Tao's hand, before Tao even realised what he was doing he bolted out the door, running towards Mr. Kingi and his son. Tao caught up with the two, sweat dripping from his forehead.

"Sorry," panted Tao, "You dropped this back at our shop."

Tao produced the taonga to Mr. Kingi, but before Mr. Kingi could register what was happening, his son quickly swiped the taonga from Tao's hand.

"Oh, shit that was close! Looks like the cord snapped," laughed Mr Kingi's son, "Thanks bro!"

He placed his hand on Tao's shoulder, Tao could feel the blood rushing to his cheeks, he quickly looked away, hoping Mr. Kingi's son wouldn't notice his cheeks ripening from the contact.

"What's your name bro? I see you every morning but you hardly ever talk," he laughed.

"Ah... My name is Tao."

"Sweet, my name is Rangi, nice to finally meet you bro, I'll see you tomorrow, don't be a stranger 'kay?" He cheekily winked at Tao.

Tao stood there dumbfounded, "Ah... ah yeah sure thing..." He slowly turned and headed back to the shop, the

sound of Rangi and his father singing slowly fading further and further away.

Throughout the whole day, Tao had a stupid smile plastered along his face; his father unsure why, but greeted the happiness nonetheless; a nice change from Tao's usual dreary self.

As the sun set for the day, Tao made his way to his room and he saw his father counting the day's earnings, putting aside a large chunk into a tin box, hidden away in a loose floorboard, "Always be prepared!" His father would say.

Tao laid in bed that night thinking to himself, "I will definitely talk to him tomorrow, I'll definitely do it." Tao closed his eyes, excited for his next encounter with Rangi.

The next morning was all but a blur to Tao, all he remembered was Rangi asking if he wanted to hang out at lunchtime, Tao saying yes and even his father allowing him to go.

"It must be because I haven't made any friends my age..." thought Tao, "Uncle Ming is young at heart, but that doesn't count... obviously..." Tao smiled at his own wittiness.

Lunchtime couldn't have come any sooner, Rangi arrived at the store with a kete in hand.

"Here's some fresh fruit son, very good for you." Tao's father handed him some fruit to put in the kete and waved them off.

Rangi took Tao to a spot near the Waikato River, Tao had never been to the river, he always stayed close to the shop. Before Tao could even take in the beauty of the area, Rangi started taking his shirt off.

"Let's go for a swim!"

He quickly jumped into the river. Tao opted for staying on land, he didn't know how to swim.

As Rangi emerged from the water, Tao could see Rangi's body shimmering in the sun, the water droplets slowly trickling down his firm and defined muscles, his taonga around his neck made Rangi appear even stronger than he already was. Tao looked away quickly, embarrassed that Rangi might've caught him gawking. Seemingly oblivious, Rangi sat down next to Tao; still wet from his swim; he grabbed an apple from the kete, holding the crimson sphere in the sun.

"Āporo."

"Ah sorry what?"

"In Māori, this is called an 'Āporo.'" He took a big bite out of the crisp apple and passed it Tao. Tao happily grabbed the āporo.

"Oh, in Chinese this is called 'Pīngguǒ'."

"Pīngguǒ," repeated Rangī, the tone of the word a bit off, they both laughed and continued to teach each other new words while munching away through their stash.

A couple of months had passed; the winter days arriving, getting colder and colder, but that didn't stop Tao and Rangī's friendship from growing deeper. Rangī wanted to show Tao something special that night so he'd have to suck it up and brave the cold.

As Tao was leaving the house he was stopped by his father.

"Tao...You need to stop seeing that boy..."

"Bāba, what do you mean?" Tao was confused.

"People are starting to talk Tao! It's not good for you to be seen with that boy all the time!", his father's voice rising with anger.

Tao's eyes began to well up, he knew what his father meant... about him being seen with "that boy".

"Bāba... I have been the happiest I have ever been since coming to this god-forsaken country!!! I have done nothing but work and work since we arrived! Finally, I have something that makes me happy and you want to take it away from me?! Again?! I was happy with māmā back in China and you bring me here! I hate you! I hate you for always taking my joy away!!!"

Tao ran out of the house and sprinted to their spot by the river, tears stinging his face in the cold. Rangī saw Tao running and embraced him.

"What happened Tao?"

Tao didn't want to answer... he couldn't answer... he didn't want Rangī knowing what people were saying behind his back. Tao finally calmed down enough for Rangī to show him the surprise; Rangī pointed to the sky

"You see those stars there? We call that 'Matariki', or 'The eyes of god'."

Tao had never seen so many stars before let alone the shining, shimmering cluster of Matariki. Rangī continued to tell Tao the story of Matariki; how Tāwhiri-mātea, angry at the separation of his parents, gouged out his eyes and threw them to the heavens, how Matariki also heralded the new year; a

new start. Tao listened intently, however he was not safeguarded from the cold. Rangi could see the coldness taking over Tao, he pulled Tao close to him and wrapped his blanket around Tao. Tao leaned his head against Rangi's shoulder, feeling the warmth.

"I like you..." Tao whispered to Rangi; it seemed right at that very moment to say.

"I know," smiled Rangi, "I like you too."

Tao walked sluggishly towards home, drained from the events of the night. As he was nearing his house, he saw a light blazing in the distance and smoke rising, Tao's heart sank. He forgot about his tiredness, fuelled by his newly found adrenaline, he sprinted to his house. It was all-consuming; the fire engulfed the house and the store, Tao yelled, tears streaming down his face.

"Bàba!!! Bàba!!!"

But there was no answer.

Tao fell to the ground, hands covering his face; sweat, tears and snot all intermingling but he didn't care, all he could remember was yelling at his father, the words "*I hate you, I hate you*" echoing in his head, he thought of the sacrifices his father had made... his stern but calm voice...the warm bowl of congee he made Tao every morning... and how he would never see the face of the man, the father, that raised him and stood by him in this strange, new land.

Suddenly from the distance Tao could hear his name being called.

"Tao! Tao is that you?!"

He saw his father scuttling towards him, he ran straight into his father's arms crying.

"Bàba I'm so sorry!"

"It's ok Tao, you're safe, that's all that matters. I'm sorry too, I love you son."

Tao's father was over at Uncle Ming's playing mah-jong; all that mattered was that they were both safe and alive.

A few days later Tao and his father set off for the docks to catch their boat back to China; the fire, a final gift from the vandals; luckily for them Uncle Ming welcomed the two to stay with him. Tao's father had found the tin box of money in one piece under the pile of ashes, "Always be prepared!", fortunately they were.

Tao didn't see Rangi since the fire, out of respect for his father, however, as they were leaving Tao could hear someone shouting his name.

“Tao!!! Tao!!! Wait up!!! Please Tao!!!”

Tao saw Rangi running towards him, he looked at his father who gave him a silent nod of approval. Rangi reached Tao panting.

“Is it true? You’re leaving?”

Tao could hear the sadness in his voice.

“Yeah, we’re going back home with what money we have left, my bāba said it should be enough to set us up.” Tao tried not to cry.

“Oh shit...”, Rangi couldn’t believe it, “Tao I know China is your home... but this is your home too y’know... but here have this so you won’t forget lil ol’New Zealand aye or me...”

Rangi took off the taonga around his neck and placed it in Tao’s hand, Tao instantly took off his jade necklace and placed it in Rangi’s hands. The two young men, tears streaming down their faces, pressed their foreheads and their noses together and breathed each other in, in that moment they were one. Rangi put his hands onto Tao’s cheeks; he could feel Rangi’s palms radiating warmth on his tear stained face; and kissed Tao on the forehead.

Tao’s father stood back saying nothing, rather, allowing the two young men their moment.

Rangi placed his taonga around Tao’s neck and put on Tao’s jade necklace around his own, they embraced one last time before Tao departed.