

Moko Taura

Mapihi sat underneath the pretty pink flowers on the camellia tree. She used the cover to hide away and avoid helping her koro move the boxes on the trailer into the old raggedy house her māmā recently reclaimed. She didn't know why her māmā made a big fuss about this house; the squatters previously living here didn't take much care of it; it was run down and ugly.

Even the weeds were growing on the walls as if Papatuānuku agreed with Tāne Mahuta and wanted the house gone by swallowing it whole. Surprisingly, inside was clean and homely, but she couldn't fight off the idea that a new 'flash' house would've been better than this.

In her hands was an old brown envelope she had saved from being stuffed into one of the cardboard boxes. Tape on the corners kept it from tearing apart, so she carefully opened it up, delving her hands into the envelope to grip the letter hidden inside. Her grip so delicate as if holding it too tightly would rip it apart.

She grinned, the sight of the letter is in a much better condition than the envelope. Brown and old, but no signs of tearing, "perfect," she whispered, still determined to stay hidden from her koro.

She enjoyed reading, but her koro insisted on packing her books away because he knew it would distract her from unpacking. And he was right.

So finding the letter was like finding her own little treasure piece that she jokingly took as a 'tohu,' a sign that her tupuna must've wanted her to see this letter.

"A good enough excuse to get out of unpacking," she thought to herself, the corners of her lips shifting into a smirk.

So she indulged herself with the story written in the letter.

My darling moko, it was a cold winter day. You were only a few days old when your mama agreed to give you, her third child, to my brother and his lovely wife. Luis disagreed with our tradition, which is why you were given and not your eldest sibling. I hope you forgive Luis for what he did to my brother, sister-in-law, and you. He's learning from his mistakes.

20 Years ago

Tau sat on one of the mattresses sprawled out on the sides of the marae. She glanced up at the carvings and tukutuku patterns all over the brown coloured walls.

Uncle Matt's tauparapara rolled off his tongue smoothly "like butter on hot potatoes," Tau hungrily thought to herself. She continued to listen and watch him, his posture proud like the kererū that sits on her camellia tree.

Next to Tau sat her cousins Oranga and Renata. The pair had dark brown skin with equally dark brown hair that contrasted Tau's blonde hair and Pākehā fair skin. Their features resembled their parents, and it was apparent they were all related. On the other hand, Tau was the black sheep of the whānau, or rather the *white* sheep. Even manuwhiri mistook her for being manuwhiri.

Oranga and Renata snickered, the latter holding onto their mother's watch, "bet he'll go thirty minutes," Oranga said to Renata.

"Nah, thirty-one minutes," Renata replied smugly.

Tau was grateful for her cousin's shenanigans; they kept her from falling asleep. They never failed to grumble and complain each time uncle Matt said, "nō reira tēnā koutou katoa," just for him to carry on.

Finally, uncle Matt finished and the brothers had mixed reactions, "kotahi haora," Oranga muttered through a yawn to Renata and Tau.

"One hour?! That's a new record," Renata whispered loudly just before Nan Kotiro stood to start the waiata tautoko.

Tau stood up to join in the singing. She smiled because this was her favourite part of any pōwhiri or hui; her family's many singing voices blended beautifully in te reo Māori.

To her, it symbolised the bond between them all; each singer sang to support their speaker, and once it was over, she couldn't help but want to sing another song. Moments like this reminded Tau that her annoying cousins, grumpy elders, drunk uncles, and bossy aunties were whānau and very important to her.

Once the pōwhiri was all over, she stood next to her pāpā. He held his tokotoko in his hand as support. Tau admired his tokotoko; he didn't go anywhere without it, and she was almost always by his side as if an invisible string bound them together.

Tau and her pāpā walked into the wharekai; no one dared to boss the spoiled 'Princess Tau' into kitchen duties, so she took care of her pāpā and the elderly while they ate.

Her cousins in the kitchen were visibly frustrated, watching Tau eat Nanny Val's famous steam pudding.

Tau walked out of the wharekai with a full stomach and a grin on her face, especially when she noticed her cousins Oranga and Renata hiding away from kitchen duties.

"Ngaw, i kōhetengia Nan Kat i a kōrua?" Tau taunted them. She knew they got a growling from Nan Kat; she just wanted to rub it in their faces. She's a good girl when it comes to helping her elders, often prioritising them over anything and anyone else. But when she's with her cousins, her cheekiness shines.

The only time Tau could act childish was when she hung out with her cousins. Being cheeky to them was her way of expressing her love for them; it was the only way she knew how to gain their attention.

Their older cousin Mauri heard her comment and walked out from the back of the wharekai to stand up for his younger cousins, "Shut up Tau, you're māngere! You never do the dishes!" He argued.

"Ko taku mahi he hāpai i ngā koeke! Not my raru the nans don't like you," whenever Tau struggled with her Pākehā words, her tongue automatically replaced it with Māori. She wasn't bothered with Mauri's statement; in fact, everyone knew Tau was one of the most hard-working mokopuna, which is why she often received favouritism from the elders,

Tau noticed Mauri's stance, so before he could whip her with the wet tea towel in his hand she ran off, a loud,

obnoxious laugh booming from her chest, which caused heads to turn, to see the two running figures.

He chased her until Tau used her 'special move,' inhaling a deep breath of air, she shouted, "Nan Kat!"

Mauri ran off before the 'kitchen beast' a.k.a Nanny Kat could see him, leaving Tau grinning from ear to ear from winning.

Glancing around, she realised the manuwhiri had entered the marae, so she slowly made her way inside and quietly sat down on the mattresses, making sure not to disturb anyone, especially her pāpā who was currently giving a manuwhiri a mirimiri.

"Tau? Ko koe tēnā?" Her pāpā looked around, his old grey eyes landing on Tau with a smile on his face. He went blind years before Tau was born, but he's never needed help to see, and Tau never questioned it. She liked to imagine he had superpowers; he could heal anyone with his mirimiri, and see anything even with blind eyes.

A month had passed, and Tau was now seven. She sat underneath her pāpā's big camellia tree, humming a sweet tune to herself. She made it a mission to take care of the tree and wait for the flowers to bloom, "e tipu, e rea," she sang to the tree.

"Kua tata tae mai a Matariki," her pāpā said, reminding her that Matariki was near, and the flowers will soon bloom.

"Tau, whakarongo mai ki aku kōrero," he spoke to her intently, his voice serious as if he knew something she didn't. So she looked up at him, gripping his hand to let him know she's listening.

“Ahakoa te aha, tēnā hoki mai ki ahau.”

His words confused her; *come back to him?*

"E, Pā! He rite tonu au ki tēnei rākau! Tū tonu, e kore rawa au e wehe atu," she grinned from ear to ear, revealing a missing front tooth, and promised to never leave his side like the camellia tree that stood on the side of their house.

"E kao, me rite tonu koe ki ēnei putiputi. Hoki mai anō," Tau would be lying if she didn't think her pāpā was acting strange.

"You are my moko taura, our bond ties us together. Remember that Tau," it wasn't often her pāpā spoke Pākehā to her, she barely understood the language; so his words made no sense to her.

Suddenly, a flash car pulled up into their driveway.

Tau skipped over to the driveway, greeting the stranger, "nau mai," she welcomed with a cute smile.

A tall, white man with blond hair stepped out of the flash car; he had an upset expression. His piercing blue eyes stared down at the young girl standing before him, and she felt uncomfortable.

"Pākehā," she mumbled to herself.

Her words sent a shiver down her spine; occasionally, she'd see a Pākehā while shopping at Countdown, but she never expected one to drive into their driveway.

"Pākehā, they only take," she thought to herself.

"I'm here to take my daughter home," the stranger declared while looking straight at Tau's pāpā who now stood at the doorway.

Tau turned to run away, but the scary stranger was quick to grab her by the arm, and pull her back.

"Ow! Ko wai koe! Kao! Tukuna i ahau!" She shouted, but he carried on, dragging her struggling figure to the car while her pāpā stood at the doorway weeping; unable to move his fragile body, he simply sobbed until his wife's sickly figure stumbled to the front door to see the commotion.

"Pāpā! Māmā!" Tau cried out. Her words, tone, and expression sent several stabs to her pāpā's heart.

Pāpā's knees gave out as he wept, falling down and injuring himself, but his stubbornness cared more about Tau's well-being than his own physical state.

"Luis!" Pāpā called out, "please don't take her away from us, we've raised her like she's our own daughter," her begged.

The Pākehā man only growled in response, "she's *my* daughter," he yelled, "I'm taking her to live with her *real* family. I never agreed to give her away, and after seven years, I finally found her."

Tau screamed hysterically, punching the stranger as much as she could. The neighbours came out of their houses to see the commotion.

"Pāpā!"

"Me he putiputi koe! Hoki mai anō."

His words finally sank in. Pāpā knew this white man was coming, she knew she had to keep fighting.

The last image of her pāpā and māmā was them crying on their knees in front of their doorway.

Tau glanced back at her pretty pink tree; it looked sad, the leaves and branches looked droopy and abandoned. Tau cried, her heart breaking as if the string between her and pāpā was being forcefully pulled and stretched apart.

By the time she reached her destination with the Pākehā man named Luis, they were in a large mansion in the South Island. Far from the Bay of Plenty, and her homely little house in Rotorua with Pāpā and Māmā.

Luis tried talking to Tau, but his words fell on deaf ears. Besides, even if she wanted to reply, she couldn't understand his big fancy Pākehā words anyways.

A year had passed since Tau moved in with her 'real' family. She had three siblings, an older sister named Meri that only wore a disgusted expression, her blue eyes always glaring as if Tau was trash.

Tau also has two brothers; an older brother named Eru, who looked and acted exactly like Tau; they got along as soon as they realised they were both missing their front tooth.

Her younger brother Wiri was three, but he still sucked on his mother's tit like a newborn baby.

Then there was Tau's biological māmā; a gentle lady named Kahurangi. She had a gorgeous smile accompanied by a lovely laugh and a welcoming voice that sounded nothing like her bossy aunties back home.

Kahurangi comforted Tau through her heartache and homesickness.

The day they met, Kahurangi revealed that she gave Tau to her parents in hopes of reviving the reo and tikanga into the family, but doing so also meant she had to go against her husband Luis's wishes.

Tau intertwined her fingers with Kahurangi, "me hoki atu au," Tau mumbled, "e tatari ana ā pāpā rāua ko māmā māku."

Bending down to look her youngest daughter in the eyes, the gentlewoman could see Tau's grief.

Not a day had gone by without Tau asking and begging to return to Pāpā, and it broke her heart to see her daughter going through this pain. She understood Tau's suffering, but couldn't do anything without making her husband angry.

"Mā te wā," she replied to Tau. The words struggled to flow off her tongue; in fact, it sounded like it was forced as if her mother language didn't recognise the home that once fluently spoke it daily.

It was nothing like Uncle Matt's reo.

"Can you speak English? I can't understand Māori," Meri spoke angrily, jealous at the attention her sister was getting from their mother. Tau glanced over at her older sister, not feeling the urge to be cheeky to Meri like how she usually would be with Oranga and Renata.

"Tau," Luis spoke up, looking at the new watch on his wrist that seemed to tell the wrong time. He didn't bother to look at Tau while he spoke, "Māori is prohibited in this house. It seems your English hasn't improved very much, so I've arranged a private tutor for you. Miss Anderson will be arriving tomorrow for your first English lesson."

Luis looked up at the clock hanging on the wall, reading the time before adjusting the time on his wrist watch to match the clock, and continuing to speak his mind, "And I've received several complaints that you have been ignoring your teachers at school; if this keeps up, then I'll be forced to discipline you." With that, Luis walked away.

"Ignoring?" Tau angrily tightened her hands into a fist, "I can't understand them," she thought, wanting to cry.

Luis was nothing like Pāpā.

Later that month, Tau woke up from a dream. Pāpā's face wore a sad smile, his complexion, white as a ghost. He appeared hauntingly sick and broken. It felt more like a nightmare than a dream.

Her heart felt empty, a strange, unexplainable feeling. If she could put it into words, it felt like the string holding her and Pāpā together had stretched too far. And snapped.

That morning, she received a letter from Kui Rangi that Pāpā had passed away a few days ago from a broken heart. The following month, Māmā passed too, both of them leaving Tau alone in this world.

The only string keeping her from following them was the promise to return to Pāpā and the pretty pink tree standing outside his whare.

She wanted to see those flowers bloom again.

Present Day

"Your pāpā and māmā loved you with all their heart and soul. Every day they prayed for you to return. Make sure you come home every now and then. E tatari ana tō pāpā māu e Tau."

Mapihi finished the story, a heavy sigh escaping her mouth. She looked up at the pink flowers hanging from the tree above her, "poor Tau," she exhaled, as her heart sank.

"Mapihi? Your koro is getting grumpy," a familiar, gentle voice spoke, ripping Mapihi away from her thoughts, "huh? He aha koe e tangi ai?"

Mapihi looked up at her māmā; she was so engrossed in the story that she hadn't realised snot and tears were running down her face. Wiping the tears away, she sniffed a few times before revealing the old letter that now had wet patches all over it.

"Māmā, did Tau get away from that mean Pākehā man?! Did she get to see the flowers bloom again?!" Mapihi couldn't help herself from being loud, and soon Koro and her brother came walking over from the trailer. Mapihi's māmā looked up at the flowers on the tree and softly smiled before Koro walked over, wrapping a comforting arm around his daughter.

He said, "it took a long time, but that Pākehā man learnt from his mistakes, and worked his hardest to make it up for the damage he caused his whānau," his voice sounded a little too hurt for Mapihi's liking.

Getting up from her spot, she walked over to her koro. She hugged him, her face looking up to see him crying, "kaua e tangi, Koro," Mapihi whispered in hopes of comforting him. Her brother sighed, joining in the whānau hug.

"So, did Tau come back to see the flowers bloom?" Mapihi asked again, feeling impatient.

Her māmā laughed loudly, which confused Mapihi, and frustrated her a little bit.

"What's so funny?!" Mapihi thought, "I wanna know!" she insisted when no one answered.

Māmā looked down at Mapihi, the whānau all still intertwined with each other, "āe Mapihi. I did."

Mapihi's eyes widened, dumbfounded at the realisation. She turned to see the pretty pink flowers on the camellia tree, and listened as her mother spoke:

"I kept my promise," Tau said, "i hoki mai ahau."