

TIANA PĒWHAIRANGI TREGO-HALL

Wairangi

Summer of 1977

Cicadas sing under the hot summer sun; a gentle breeze cool the nikau trees along the riverbank uplifting an aroma of freshly cut grass. Waipoua Campgrounds never looked so vivacious. Hearing the call of nature, two cousins strip off their t-shirts and dive into the awa.

“Coldwater filled her lungs and blood pounded behind her dark brown eyes. She tries to call for help but the cold water engulfs her, and the taniwha wraps himself around her neck and BAM! He drags her into the awa, living as a mermaid forever!” Ihaka bellows.

“Eh, you’re full of shit Haks. Māori don’t believe in mermaids, and besides taniwha don’t even live here,” cries Teina.

“Yeah, they do, his name is Jimmy, and he lives in my pants. Wanna have a look?” laughs Ihaka, cheekily. “Just jokes, I’m not like Uncle Hone. But you know what I will do?”

His eyes dart from Teina to the water. Teina knows what’s to come, and he isn’t having any of it. Swiftly, he swims against the current, his head bobbing in and out of the water, gasping for air.

“You can’t out swim me, Cuz. I’m coming for you!” shouts Ihaka.

With the riverbank insight, Teina takes one more deep breath. Head underwater, he can feel the vibration of his legs hitting the water’s surface. Almost there, he can’t get me now. Come on Teina you got this, he thinks.

“Here comes Jaws, gonna eat you all up, na na na na”.

"Piss off Haks!"

"Got ya!" Haks tackles Teina into the water.

"Ahh you're choking me, get off", Teina wails.

"You gotta say, Haks is the bestest cousin, and is better looking than John Travolta."

"Haks is the bestest cousin an-"

"You have to finish the rest, Teina."

"Haks help", babbles Teina.

"Oh shit!" panics Ihaka, "Cuz. Cuz, where are you?"

Eyes closed. A weightless body sinks into the deadly trench. The phrase, "life flashing before your eyes" clicks all at once. In a second, Teina doesn't remember any of it. His mind, body and soul are about to be separated, no longer to be of this world. "He will be ours. Come we won't hurt you, mokopuna of Tāne, come to us" they chant.

The distinct smell of freshly fried bread, melted butter and burning oil all singeing and mangling together creeps into Teina's nostrils, registering his consciousness. Wide eyes on a small head, a big blanket swallows his skinny body.

"Ah, you're awake Boy. Come, I just finished putting on some bread. Your cousin is helping some tourists to their room," announces Aunty G.

Teina's stomach rumbles at the sight of his aunty buttering the bread.

"Here you go, Boy. There's jam and golden syrup on the table. Now, hoi. What did I tell you about swimming in that part of the awa, ay? You know what happened to Nana's sister. Bloody hell if anything happened... your mother would have my head on a chopping board."

"Sorry Aunty, I didn't mean to," whispered Teina.

"It's okay Boy, I know it was Haks that took you there, the egg. Now we best eat up before the bread gets cold," orders Aunty G.

"Aunty, I saw a taniwha when I drowned."

Turning into the kitchen Ihaka interjects, "Don't lie Teina, I didn't show you my raho."

“No, I saw an actual taniwha. Honest Aunty, I swear,” pleads Teina.

“Did you now? What did it look like?” probes Aunty G.

“Well... I didn't see it good, but I heard it. It was pretty and sung to me.”

“What a little liar you are,” chokes Ihaka.

“Shut up, Ihaka leave your cousin alone. Anyway, it's the bloody night where the hell have you been?” questions Aunty G.

“I met this really pretty girl, Aunty,” answers Ihaka, “Her name is Aisling; she came in with that Murphy whānau from Ireland.”

“What girl? I didn't see a girl when they were checking in, they only asked for two beds. They better not be ripping me off.”

“Is that your mermaid girlfriend ay, Haks?” giggles Teina.

“Shut up you egg; she's a real girl. Unlike your stupid taniwha,” argues Ihaka.

“Hey, cut it out you two. Go get your stink asses in the shower, and off to bed it's almost 10 pm,” instructs Aunty G.

Ihaka lays in bed reminiscing the day gone by. Ihaka didn't tell the others, but he has plans to meet up with Aisling tomorrow afternoon for an evening swim. He's never thought of himself as a romantic; the only girls he's ever been around were his cousins or the ones at school. Then again everyone within a 15km radius is related, one way or another. “I'll have to bring Aisling to Sunday dinner and introduce her to the whānau. Yeah. That'll be a good idea. Nana is going to think she's beautiful,” he thinks. That night Ihaka goes to sleep dreaming of the fiery redhead and her crimson cheeks.

Ihaka spends the morning helping Aunty G with maintenance around the campgrounds. Ihaka is determined to finish his mahi before his date with Aisling; he even woke up at 6 to clean the chicken coop. Ihaka hopes his mahi is sufficient for Aunty G to let

him go early to get ready for his big date, until she - busting his balls - requests his Nana-watch services for the evening, so she can attend Karaoke night at the pub. Uncool. Saturday night hanging out with his quadriplegic, mute nana - whom he adores - but he wants to adore Aisling tonight! The more he thinks about it, the more his mind wanders to when he first saw the beauty. He recalls being unable to move; the time stopped as his eyes locked with her intense gaze, memorised by her. Ihaka was in awe of Aisling's slim pale figure swimming seamlessly around his body. It wasn't him who saved Teina from drowning; no in truth it was Aisling. If this is what he is thinking of now, how could he go on a date with Nan watching? It wasn't that Ihaka doesn't like his Nana; he *loves* her. Heck, he might as well call her Mum considering she raised him. It's just not what he has in mind.

This afternoon couldn't have come any sooner. Wheeling Nana towards the riverbank he sits her under a Pohutukawa tree. After ten minutes, Aisling hasn't shown up. Ihaka begins plucking the grass beneath him. Soon, ten minutes turns to thirty minutes, and thirty minutes turns into an hour. The sun is setting for the day. Ihaka's mind wonders. Where is she? She said she'd meet me here at 3, it's almost 5. Maybe she doesn't feel like going for a swim, I knew I should've cooked for her instead. What if I'm too ugly for her? She's probably moved on from me already with the Pākehā boy up the road. No, she can't have! Aisling wouldn't do that. Did she even like me?

Ihaka's insecurities kick in, "Nan, am I ugly?"

The elderly woman adjusts her little chalk and board in her lap, then sits for a moment and with the utmost concentration she writes, "Yes". A deep boisterous laugh escapes Nana's mouth.

"Geez, you're naughty alright, Nana", Ihaka laughs.

From the distance, an angelic voice is heard.

“Haks are you here?”

Getting off his butt, Ihaka joyfully exclaims, “Aisling you came!”

Hugging him Aisling apologises in her thick Irish accent, “Sorry I’m late Haks I was caught up with my family sightseeing.”

“No worries, I have someone for you to meet. Aisling this is my Nana. Nana this is the Irish girl Aisling I told you about.”

With a stern unpleasant face, Nana looks the girl up and down as if to say, “What the hell are you doing with my mokopuna?”

Noticing Nana’s hostility, Ihaka guides Aisling towards the river, “Sorry about that. Nana isn’t used to meeting other people,” explains Ihaka.

“Aw, that’s alright she reminds me of my granny back home. Let’s go for a swim, I remember you telling me about something called a bomb?” Aisling giggles.

The two swim around the awa exchanging childhood stories, and Ihaka describes the wonders of Aotearoa - from the dunes of Opononi to the L&P bottle in Paeroa. And in exchange, she tells him of the cold, white winters of Ireland, and how the mountains look like brownies covered in icing. They laugh together, and at one point they simply stare at one another, being comfortable in each other’s company, which didn’t bother either one of them in the slightest. The sunset and loud snores of his sleeping Nana reminds Ihaka that he needs to leave.

“I’ve got to get Nana home, but will I see you tomorrow?” questions Ihaka.

“For sure!” answers Aisling. “Maybe you can take me for a tour around this place. I’ll come to find you tomorrow.”

The next morning comes, an early breakfast: steaming porridge and cream, the aroma fills the atmosphere in the beaming dining room. With his blissful thoughts, Ihaka sings,

“Mōrena, e te whānau.”

“Mōrena neph! What are your plans for today?” responds Aunty G.

Ihaka has a stupid smile on as he kisses his Nana on the cheek, “I’m hanging out with Aisling today. Going to take her for a tour around here.”

“What? A tour around your pants,” chuckles Teina.

All the while Nana tries to convey a message in sign language, but her cause is hopeless. In desperation for attention, she tries to resort to speech, but this only results in the harsh and guttural sounds of a deaf-mute, and a bit of drool: “Hah, ayy, ah, mme, er”. Failing to say, Nana takes a piece of chalk out of her pocket, and writes on the blackboard: HAKS. STAY AWAY FROM HER. EVIL. “Just because she was late yesterday doesn’t make her evil” Ihaka protests and rubs out the message. Nana grunts angrily, and writes again: STAY AWAY. NO GO WITH HER TODAY!

“No, Nana she’s a friend! Just because you don’t have any,” yells Ihaka. Blinded by naivety Haks sprints out of the house to find Aisling. He wants to stay with Aisling; they became close in half a day and he considers her a friend. Maybe it is selfish of him, but he feels attached to her, even though they only had a day together. He doesn’t care if it is selfish. Aisling sees Ihaka sprinting towards her, “Haks what happened? Are you okay?” Out of breath, he can’t answer. “Come Haks, I have something to show you. I’ve found part of the river in the forest,” Aisling harries off. Losing sight of Aisling, Ihaka follows the sound of her footsteps.

As Ihaka ventures in further, the forest becomes thicker; century-old kauri trees stand tall with sky-high limbs guarding the darkness, blotting out any sunlight. Their flaky barks ooze amber coloured gum, and their legs are coated with vibrant wet moss. The stiffening air and humid atmosphere provides the perfect abode for those who worship the darkness. Ihaka shuffles uncomfortably as he approaches the awa. Sounds of flutes carrying an apocalyptic melody are heard in the distance. Ihaka loses

his body to the alluring high pitch of the flutes, his mind is consumed by the music, and his spirit frozen. His eyes wander his surroundings as he tries to recall exactly why he is here. A pungent tang rises from the forest floor drawing power from the awa, the mist becomes heavier in substance and intensity. An insidious beauty bubbles from the awa. Gliding on the water's surface, she is decorated in red harakeke and the bones of her previous victims. The monster stares at Ihaka, hungry for his blood. Her sharp eyes glitter with hate, as wild and vicious as an animal. Leaf-shaped ears sprout from either side of her head, sticking to them her clammy knotted hair.

The monster gazes coldly into Ihaka's eyes, "You should have listened to your nana. Stupid boy. I guess I was just too pretty," her voice and pithy laugh are lifeless and echo with cruelty and the uncouth. Captivated by the bitter-sweet of her presence, Ihaka can now see that this is not a pretty-faced Aisling whom he'd fallen for. But a Patupaiarehe of the deep. Ihaka's body trembles feverishly; his teeth vigorously rattle as the numbness spreads. He finds he can no longer feel his own body, or barely grasp his thoughts. The Patupaiarehe moves upon the mist on the forest floor, closer and closer, stalking her prey. Her long claws brush against Ihaka's face in search of a substance deeper than the skin's surface. The intense tempo of the flutes outroar the sound of Ihaka's furious heartbeat. Greeted with dirty, uncut nails scraping down his stomach, Ihaka wails in torment. Eyes melted to the back of his head; tears stream down his face. Every shallow breath feels like a marathon for survival. And suddenly he tastes his fear and can't escape the inexplicable knowing that death is here. For him.