

HANNAH WHAREMATE

The Tangi

The first day, it was dark, the clouds hung over us, not only the rain clouds but the cloud of sadness that lingered since that last day with him. We stood huddled at the gate, hiding from the rain under umbrellas but also from the eyes of the crowds of people watching us in our grief. The kaumatua of the marae signaled it was time, time for us to take him inside the Marae where he would lay, where we would share him with all the others who had come to be with him.

We heard the wailing call of the kaikaranga calling out, the haunting sound echoing, carried on the winds as if her voice was not just one, but one of many. Those calls beckoning us forward, not just us that stood there but those of our tupuna who were so close to us that day. The boys, well they all looked like men that day, they carried him, the responsibility theirs to honor him well in this moment, it showed in how they walked, tall, strong, calm, focused. While their heads hung low, we could sense the mana they felt in this duty. Slowly they walked, guided by the calls, we followed hand in hand, united as whanau, each step closer and closer. They laid him gently at the base of the pou

tuarongo, his sons gently raising the lid of his coffin, his sister while weeping, gently layed the Korowai made with her own hands over him, her last gift to him. His tokotoko laid with him one last time. The photos of his tupuna laid at his feet, they were with him, we felt them there in that moment. The flowers were gently laid around him, each bouquet sent with thoughts of love and respect for him, but also reminding us that others were there with us in our grief. Each of the blooms, bright in colour cutting through the darkness of that day.

As the whanau pani, we sat together, at first it was overwhelming, our tear stained faces the outward sign of our collective grief, the glances between us, recognition that we each understood what those tears meant. In this place we could grieve openly, our tears welcomed, encouraged. The following hours they played out as if we were part of a live play, each of us with a part, some of us a little surer in our roles than others, but the ones who were not so sure, prompted in the moments of unsurety by those who had played the parts many times before. The speeches, there were many, the korero delivered honouring our tupuna, our grief and him, they really did honour him. Even in the reo not always understood, there were kupu we all recognized, those ones that talked of his mana, his aroha, messages we all understood well. Each speech followed by waiata so sweet, with each song sung, we felt him there singing with us, we could almost hear his voice as if he was part of an angel choir.

When it was time for us to allow the manuhiri to come up and pay their respects, we all stood, shoulder to shoulder, lined up as whanau. At this

moment there was a shift, a shift in roles. We could see in the lines of mourners waiting, those same tear-stained cheeks that we had worn for days, were there on the faces of them too. They stood waiting, some heads hung low, some glancing over to us for a sense of connection in this feeling. As they each moved closer, their turn, their first chance to see that it was true, it was him lying there, something we had had a few days to process. Some were overwhelmed, their emotions spilled out in sobbing and muffled words said just to him as they bent down to kiss his cheek. As they made their way down the line, greeting us each with a hongī, a kiss, or a warm hug, while we were grieving, we felt the sense that they needed us to care for them in that moment. So, we hugged them, reassured them, helped them wipe their tears. Many of them were unfamiliar faces to us, but to each of them we felt connected, because we knew they loved him too.

It was after those first few hours that our grief, from agonizing pain, it turned into more of a celebration for him. It was in the hours after, that we took turns gathering in the wharekai for the hākari. We would eat and reminisce and connect with all those who had come. At first, it felt weird to laugh together, but it was in the sharing of stories about him that we felt comfort, remembering that in all this seriousness he would be the one to lighten the mood. He would want us to be happy together.

For the three days there, the weather outside, it was dark, it was cold, and in a way, it was a metaphor for the feeling each group of mourners felt as they waited for that same call from the kaikaranga. With each new group, they were walking those very same

slow and solemn steps that we had taken. Each of them experiencing, just as we had on that first day, the full range of emotion as they saw him lying there the first time. As the whanau pani, we took our turns to greet them, to listen to them, to sing with them. We took turns to console them, to share him with them. With each group welcomed into that space, each brought with them something new, stories to be told, memories to be shared, lessons learned from him. The motion, it came in waves, sometimes crashing peaks of sadness, some moments still and calm, others filled with joy.

While the days were long, we cherished each of the moments we got to sit with him, we took turns to stroke his face, to talk with him. It was in the time between groups of visitors we got to spend some quiet time. Just whanau talking, sharing, singing. It was at night though, that we really had him for ourselves. Though dark and cold outside, inside the wharenuī the lights were burning brightly, the mattresses lined up side by side, we sat and talked, we passed the tokotoko, shared our memories, our favourite times, the things we would miss the most. Again, we cried, but equally we laughed. He would want it that way.

As the dawn of each new day came, while we tried not to think of it, it was there in our minds this was one day closer to really saying goodbye. To push that thought aside, we kept on going, each day new visitors to greet, food to eat, lots of food. The nannies, would share their wisdom to the young ones, preparing us for the days when all of this would be ours to take care of. The koro's, they were there guiding the young ones too. Reminding them

of the roles they played now and in the future. The kids, they just played, and played, how great it was to be with the cousins. He would have loved that too, watching the kids just being kids, even the tutu's. Sometimes we older kids would be kept busy with those younger ones, really that was all we had to do when we were not sitting with him. This was not like any other time on the marae for us, usually were busy all day, cooking, cleaning, taking care of the manuhiri. Not this time, the nannies in the kitchen would not allow us to help, turned away with any suggestion that we could be a part of it. They were taking care of us this time.

That last day, it was like he wanted some drama, the winds howled, the rain poured. It was time to take him to his final resting place, we knew he was ready, but he was not going to leave here without a show. We all joked as we walked out in that rain, following him out to the hearse. "Ok Papa, thanks for that", we could hear the boys say. We huddled under umbrellas, wrestling them in the wind, it was a good distraction from the emotion that in that moment might have overwhelmed us. Yes, it was him, he was helping us through it. Northward we would travel, our cars all in a line. The journey was long, but in the cars it gave us time to just be still, no need to talk to anyone, just sit with our own thoughts for a while.

The last part of his journey, in his home Marae. How peaceful it was there, the green mountains sheltering, protecting this place. No crowds of visitors, just us and him. Here we could really be. It was here that we really felt peace, we had come full circle in our grief. In this place, we could feel him

near, him and his tupuna. They were felt close in the pictures that hung on the walls, they were there in the little things, like those whom we had been told many times before, had laid each of the rocks in the walls that surrounded the fields around us. His place was alive with their spirits, they welcomed us here, they encircled us with the memories we shared of them.

For the last time with him, the kaikaranga called for us to come, this time to where he would lay. This was the place where we were returning him, home to be with his mother, his father, his brothers, and sisters. The Korowai was removed from on top of his coffin and lovingly wrapped around his oldest son. Again, on every face there were tears, these were different though. In these ones instead of grief so much, more of recognition, he was going to stay here now where he was meant to be. The flowers that had brightened the wharenuī days before, now shared amongst us all. We took our time, each one of us placing one flower on his lowered coffin. Our last thought we left with him there, “we love you Papa, till we meet again.”

One last meal together before we left that place, it was a time to be together, a celebration feast. The dining hall was full, it was noisy, it was happy. Joyful chatter, connections with family and friends evident. We talked about how perfect these last few days had been, as if he had planned it himself. Yes, he was in the details, this is the way he would have wanted it to be. This time together, only a few days, though it seemed so much longer. It was in these days so much had happened, they were dark and cold at first, so hard to get through. In the

togetherness with the help of tradition, those dark days turned to brighter ones, a full circle of grieving, learning, and healing.