



# The Fantail

BY STEPH MATUKU

It was the holidays. My sister Jojo and I were at our cousin Piri's house. We weren't doing much, just sitting around in Piri's bedroom listening to music and arguing about everything and nothing – when this *thing* flew in through the open window.

“Get out of here! Hurry!” Piri yelled, taking off out the door.

Well, we didn't stick around to figure out what was going on. We just sprinted after him. We followed Piri through the kitchen and into the back garden. He stopped by the clothes line, panting, his eyes wide and scared.

“What's wrong?” Jojo asked.

“Yeah, Piri!” I said. My heart was pounding hard in my chest. “You nearly gave me a heart attack! What's the matter? What *was* that thing?”

“It was a pīwaiwaka!” Piri said. “A fantail. It flew through the window! And you know what that means ...”

We shook our heads. We didn't have a clue what Piri was on about.

“When a fantail flies into your house, it's really bad luck.”

“I don't believe that,” said Jojo. Nothing scared her. “That's just a superstition. Some people say it's bad luck to walk under a ladder – and that's not true, either.”

“It'd be bad luck if someone was up the ladder painting and the bucket of paint dropped on your head,” Piri said.

He had a point.

“What kind of bad luck could a fantail bring?” I asked. I didn't believe him. Not really. But what if he was telling the truth?

We hunkered down under the clothes line. Towels flapped in the breeze, casting flickering shadows across our faces.

Piri leant in close, his voice low. “The fantail thing starts with Māui. A long time ago, he decided he wanted to cheat death.”

“Yeah right!” said Jojo. She folded her arms, her top lip curling in disbelief. “Māui isn’t real. He’s from legends.”

“How do you know?” asked Piri. “Were you there?”

Again, Piri had a point. Jojo didn’t say anything.

“Anyway, his plan was to beat Hine-nui-te-pō, the goddess of death, by travelling through her body.”

“Ew,” said Jojo.

“Be quiet!” I said. I wanted to hear what happened next. Even if it wasn’t true, it was a pretty good story.

“Māui waited until Hine-nui-te-pō fell asleep, but just as he was going in, a fantail started laughing, and the goddess woke up and killed Māui. She won, and that’s why we don’t live forever.”

“And that’s why a fantail’s bad luck!” I said. “But what *kind* of bad luck?” I thought it might be forgetting your togs for swimming sports, crash-landing your bike in gravel instead of grass, or having your stink cousin rip a hole in your favourite T-shirt. I frowned at Piri, remembering. I loved that T-shirt.

“Duh! What do you think?” Jojo said. “He means if a fantail flies into your house, someone is going to die.”

“What?” I gasped. That had to be the worst luck ever.

“Don’t blame me,” said Piri. “I didn’t make it up. That’s just what they say.”

“And who’s *they*?” said Jojo.

“Everyone,” said Piri.

“Whatever,” Jojo groaned.

“But ...” I was shocked. Someone I knew might die? It could be Jojo. Or Piri. It could be Mum or Dad or my teacher ... or any of my friends. It could be the guy at the dairy! But *who*?

“How do you know it was a fantail, anyway?” Jojo said. “We took off before we could tell for sure. It could’ve been a waxeye or a sparrow. They’re not bad luck.”



“It’ll be bad luck if it poos on my bed,” Piri said gloomily.  
“Shouldn’t you go inside and check?” Jojo said. “You could be freaking out for no reason.”

“I’m not going in there!” Piri said. “Then I’ll get double bad luck!”  
“I’m not going, either,” I said. “No way. Not ever.”  
“Well, someone’s going to have to get the bird out,” Jojo said. “What if it can’t figure the way out by itself? It’ll be stuck in your room forever. You’ll have to sleep in the shed.”

“I’d rather sleep in the shed than go back in there,” said Piri.  
Another shadow fell across us, a big one this time. We looked up to see my aunty taking the towels off the line. We watched as she folded and stacked them in the washing basket.

“What’s up?” she said. “You kids seem quiet.”  
“There’s a fantail in my room!” Piri said.  
Aunty stopped folding, and a serious look came over her face.  
“Come on, Aunty. You don’t believe that fantails are bad luck, do you?” said Jojo.

“Well,” she said slowly. “I don’t want to scare you kids ... but the day before Uncle Wiremu died, a pīwaiwaka flew in through the lounge window and out the back door – and that’s the truth. Some people said it was a tohu – a sign.”

“I told you!” said Piri.  
“But then he was an old man,” Aunty said, “and sick.”  
“So he would have died anyway,” Jojo said, scowling at Piri.  
“Yeah, but why then? Why just after the fantail?”

Piri insisted. He looked at Aunty. “We were just sitting in my room, and it came flying through the window – really fast. It was just a blur.”

Aunty broke into a huge smile.  
“You mean about five minutes ago?”  
“Yes,” we said.  
Aunty started laughing.



“I just chucked a pair of clean socks through the window! And what have I told you about keeping your washing away from the towels? You’ve got to wash them separately or else your clothes get covered in fluff. Auē. A fantail? You kids have too much imagination.”

She stacked the rest of the towels and took them away. We could still hear her laughing as she went into the house.

“See?” said Jojo. “I told you it wasn’t a fantail.”  
“It might have been!” Piri said. His face was red and cross. “And if it was, someone we know could have died. You heard Mum’s story about Uncle Wiremu!”

Jojo turned to me. “So what do you think? Are fantails bad luck or not?”  
I didn’t know what to say. I liked watching the little fantails in our garden. I liked their cheerful “peep, peep” and the way they flew in real close to say hello. I decided that fantails might be bad luck for some people, but they weren’t bad luck for me.

“I’m pretty sure fantails are OK,” I said slowly. “But ...”  
“But what?” asked Jojo.  
“What does it mean if a pair of grey socks flies in through your window? Is that bad luck?”

We looked at each other in silence.  
Was it?

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by Steph Matuku

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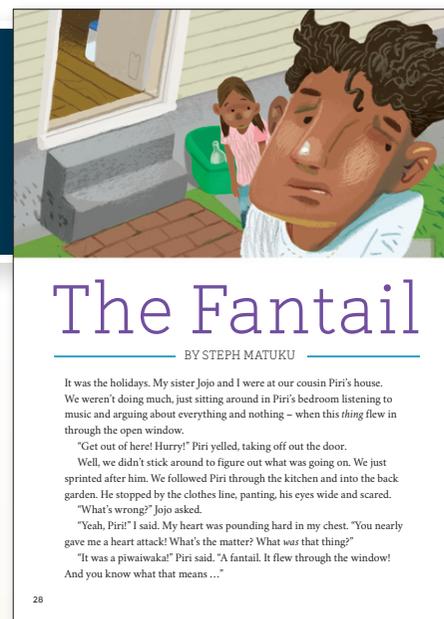
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