

Hana Kōkō

by Steph Matuku

We were all curious the day Dad went shopping and came home with his bag bulging. Ānaru tried to make him open it. Nan and Auntie Kōwhai tried, too. But he refused.

“At least give us a clue,” I said, giving the bag a friendly poke.

“Ho, ho, ho,” said Dad.

“Hmm,” said Ānaru. “I’m thinking Santa’s in there.”

“Correct!” Dad cried. “Geoff asked me to dress up on Saturday. So I bought a Santa costume.”

Geoff was the manager of the local farmers’ market, and this Saturday was the last Saturday before Christmas. Our whānau loved the market. We had a stall there every week, selling jam and chutney made from the fruit in our orchard. Dad cooked it all himself, and on market day, he was our frontman. He liked to be generous – and he liked attention. Sometimes, after a good conversation with a passer-by, he’d give them a jar of something for free. “That’s for jamming a good story,” he’d say.

People liked my dad and all his jam and chutney. Even counting the freebies, we still made a profit. There was always enough for Ānaru and me to get paid for helping out. We’d spend our money at the fudge stall. Market days were the best, and so was our dad – although the day he came home with his costume, it was clear Auntie Kōwhai thought he was nuts.





“You can’t be Santa,” she said.
“It’s December. You’ll get heatstroke.”
“Yeah,” I said. “You’ll sizzle like streaky bacon.”
“Will I?” said Dad. Clearly he knew something we didn’t.
“You will,” Ānaru said. “Another thing: you don’t look anything like Santa – no offence.”

He was right about that. Everyone knows Santa Claus is plump, with rosy cheeks and a curly white beard. My dad’s brown and muscly. He has tattoos on his arms and legs, and he can’t grow a beard. He’s tried a few times, but the hairs just don’t want to come. We doubted they were even there.

Nan laughed. “You’ll have to tie a pillow round your tummy, which is ironic considering how much time you spend at the gym trying to get rid of the pillow round your tummy!”

“Hold on, hold on,” Dad said. “When did I say *how* I was dressing?”
“Just before!” Ānaru said. “You said you bought a Santa costume.”
“Ah, well,” Dad said. “I see the confusion ... but you’re all jumping the gun. I’m not going as a regular Santa. I’m going as Hana Kōkō, the Māori Santa!”
Ānaru and I exchanged a look. “That’s a cool idea, Dad,” I said slowly.
“But people can be a bit weird about tradition.”
“Tradition,” Nan snorted. “What rot! Whose tradition?”
“That’s right,” Auntie Kōwhai said. “This is Aotearoa! Who wears a woolly suit and a furry hat and boots in summer?”
“Yeah,” said Ānaru. We were on a roll. “I always thought a sleigh pulled by magic reindeer was a bit strange, too.”
“Giving presents to every person in the world in one night?” I said.
“And what if you don’t have a chimney?” Nan grumbled. “Hardly fair. Where’s the Christmas spirit in that?”
“The elves!” I added. “They work all year round. No weekends, no holidays. Who wants presents made by slave labour?”
“Look on the bright side,” Nan said. “At least they get to play with the new toys before they come out in the shops.”
“Speaking of which,” Dad said. “I need elves to make putiputi harakeke for our stall. Hmmm. I wonder where I could find some? Let me see ...”
Nan went off to cut flax. When she got back, Auntie Kōwhai cleaned the leaves and split them into even-sized widths. We spent the rest of the night weaving putiputi until our fingers were stiff. “Just like real elves,” Ānaru said.



On Saturday, we set up in our usual spot under the pūriri tree. Dad was still arranging his jars when Geoff came over. He was with his grandson, a small boy with an ice block. Red juice was dripping all down his front.

“Ready for duties?” Geoff asked Dad in a low voice, giving me and Ānaru a wink. We didn’t say anything. We had the feeling he had no idea what Dad was up to – and besides, Geoff’s grandson was there. Who spoils Hana Kōkō for a little kid?



Dad went off to get changed. The market was busy already. We stood by our stall and gave away putiputi. One lady said she would use hers as a bookmark. A guy with a topknot tucked his one in his hair, then bought four jars of chutney. We were having a nice chat when there was a fuss in the crowd. People were turning to look. It was Dad, of course – and he looked cool as. He was wearing a shirt printed with pōhutukawa flowers, a kākahu kura, and a piupiu. Around his neck, he wore his pounamu hei tiki, and he carried a kete.

“Meri Kirihimete!” Dad called. His eyes were sparkling. He was loving it. People were smiling and clapping as he passed by. “Kia ora, Hana Kōkō!” called the lady on the fudge stall.

Geoff appeared out of nowhere. He didn’t look pleased. “I told you to wear a Santa Claus outfit!” he said. “What’s that meant to be?”

Ānaru narrowed his eyes. I felt my ears getting hot. But Dad just grinned. He took a putiputi harakeke and a jar of relish and handed them to Geoff. “Meri Kirihimete,” he said. “I’m Hana Kōkō, here to spread the spirit of Christmas, just like you asked.”

Geoff didn’t know what to say. Now people were taking photos of Dad. Ānaru and I were smiling like anything. Geoff’s grandson tugged on Dad’s cloak. His mouth was stained red; his shirt was even redder. “Hey, Santa! You’ve got summer clothes like me!”

Dad gave him a high-five. “Smart, eh?”



illustrations by
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