

Rongoā Māori

by André Ngāpō



Mum was feeling sick. Dad was away with my brother at a soccer tournament, and Aunty Toni and I had been looking after Mum all morning, giving her drinks and chicken soup. I was worried.

“It’ll be OK,” said Aunty Toni, looking at me. “It’s not too bad. Just a 24-hour bug, I reckon.”

Then Nan arrived. She rubbed Mum’s back and held a cold flannel against her forehead.

After lunch, Nan picked up her kete and car keys.

“Right, Ana,” she said to me. “It’s time to get some medicine.”

“Won’t be long,” she called to Mum.

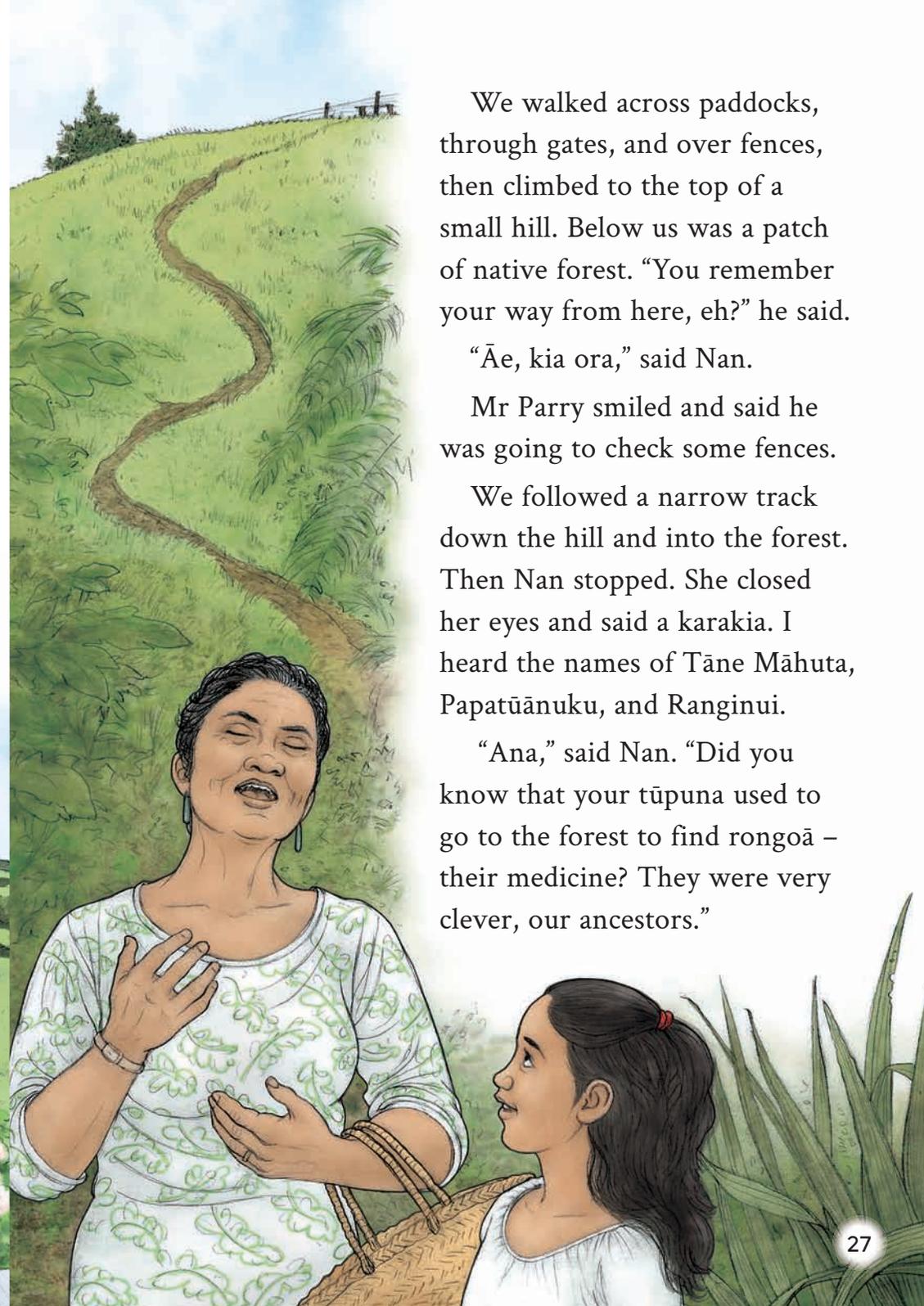
We drove through town, past the shops, past the chemist. I looked back and wondered why we didn't stop.

We kept driving, out towards the farms on the edge of town. Finally we stopped at a big farmhouse and Nan knocked on the door.

A farmer opened the door. Nan gave him a big hug, and I shook his hand. Nan said he was Mr Parry, an old friend of hers.

"I've come to collect some rongoā," said Nan.

"Ka pai," said Mr Parry.



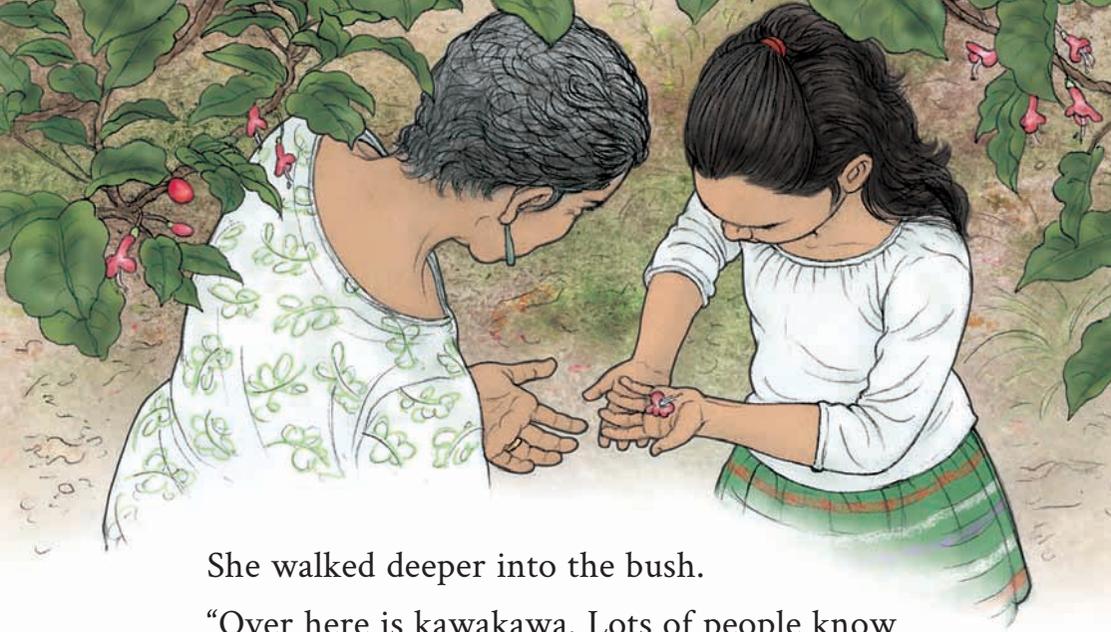
We walked across paddocks, through gates, and over fences, then climbed to the top of a small hill. Below us was a patch of native forest. "You remember your way from here, eh?" he said.

"Āe, kia ora," said Nan.

Mr Parry smiled and said he was going to check some fences.

We followed a narrow track down the hill and into the forest. Then Nan stopped. She closed her eyes and said a karakia. I heard the names of Tāne Māhuta, Papatūānuku, and Ranginui.

"Ana," said Nan. "Did you know that your tūpuna used to go to the forest to find rongoā – their medicine? They were very clever, our ancestors."



She walked deeper into the bush.

“Over here is kawakawa. Lots of people know about this rongoā because it has so many uses, and you can find it all over Aotearoa. Your koro used to chew on the leaves when he had a toothache.”

She pointed to another tree. “And this is pūriri. It’s good for all sorts of things – sore throats, sore muscles, sprains.” She carefully broke off a flower to show me. I held it in my hands gently, like it was a tiny, baby bird.

“Rongoā has to be treated with care. You can’t just pick it and eat it – it could make you very sick. You have to learn the correct ways, the safe ways.”

I looked up at Nan. The pūriri flower in my hand felt like a special treasure.

“Oh look!” said Nan, her smile growing even bigger. “This is koromiko. This is what your mum needs. Lots of kaha in this medicine!”

We walked further down the hill, carrying our rongoā in Nan’s kete.

Mr Parry joined us halfway down. I noticed he was limping.

“What’s wrong with your leg, Matua?” I asked.

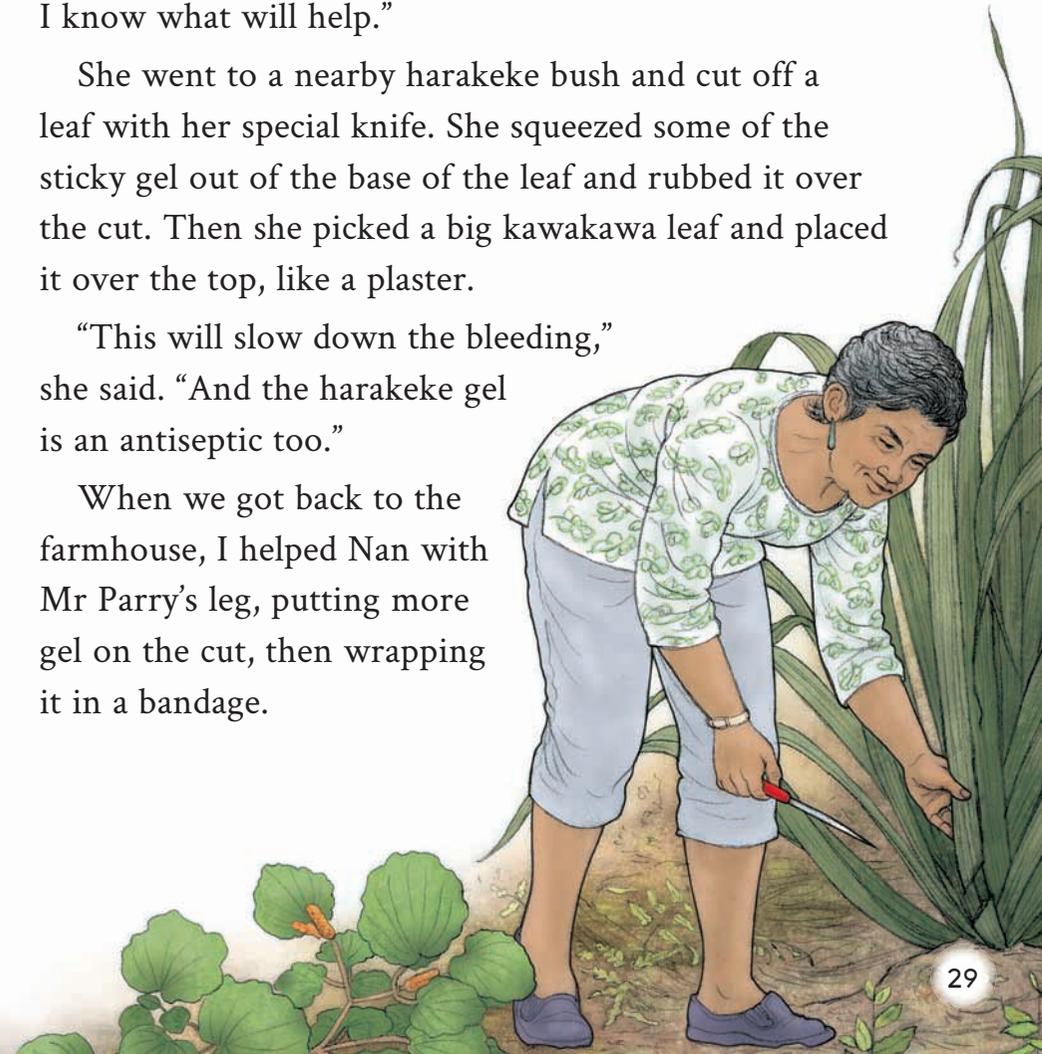
“Oh, it’s nothing,” he said. “I just scratched it on a bit of barbed wire.”

“That’s more than a scratch,” said Nan. “Hang on, I know what will help.”

She went to a nearby harakeke bush and cut off a leaf with her special knife. She squeezed some of the sticky gel out of the base of the leaf and rubbed it over the cut. Then she picked a big kawakawa leaf and placed it over the top, like a plaster.

“This will slow down the bleeding,” she said. “And the harakeke gel is an antiseptic too.”

When we got back to the farmhouse, I helped Nan with Mr Parry’s leg, putting more gel on the cut, then wrapping it in a bandage.





“Thanks,” said Mr Parry. “Now you’d better get back to Ruby. Don’t let me hold you up.”

I looked at Mr Parry’s leg, feeling proud that I had helped someone by using rongoā.

In the car, I held Nan’s kete safe in my arms.

“Can you teach me more about rongoā Māori?” I asked.

“Āe, Ana,” said Nan, smiling.

At home, Nan prepared the koromiko. She put the leaves into a pot of warm water to steep.

“Nan’s rongoā will fix you,” I said to Mum. I told her all about the rongoā in the forest and helping Mr Parry.

“Oh, Ana,” said Mum. “I think I feel a bit better already, just talking about it.”

“But you haven’t even tried it yet,” I said.

“I told you it has lots of kaha,” smiled Nan. “Just talking about rongoā Māori might be enough to cure your mum.”

We all laughed. Then, when the koromiko was ready, Mum took a big sip. And I didn’t feel so worried any more.



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illustrations by Elspeth Alix Batt

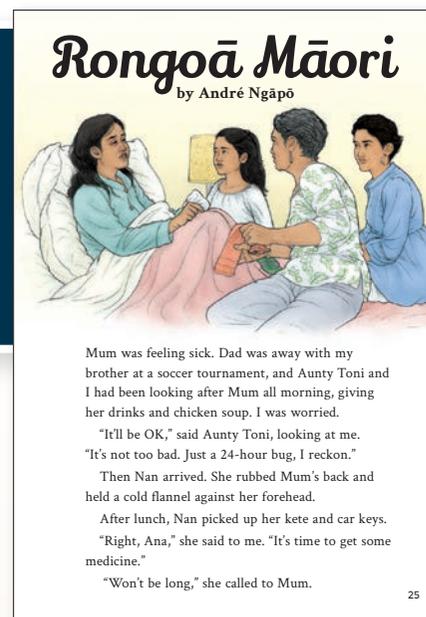
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