

TOHUNGA

BY POTIKI
- BASED ON A TRUE STORY -



It was early morning, and their mother had been up all night. Hana watched from the doorway as Mā put a hand on Rāmahi’s forehead.

“Get the hōiho,” she said to Te Ao. “We go soon.”

“Back to the doctor?” Te Ao asked. Hana’s brother was always asking questions.

At the sound of the word, Rāmahi whimpered. “Kia kaha, son,” Mā reassured him. “There’ll be no more doctors.”

Te Ao and Hana saddled Mā’s horse, packed the second horse, and waited. They didn’t have to wait long.

Mā emerged from the whare and climbed on her horse, taking the reins in one hand. She motioned to Hōri, the eldest, who was carrying his sick brother. Hōri was to stay behind to care for the little ones, tend the animals and māra, and keep the fire burning. They would need hot water and kai when they returned.

The older boy gently lifted Rāmahi and sat him in front of Mā. The boy slumped forward and wrapped his arms around the animal’s neck. “If anyone comes round, tell them we’ve gone to the store,” Mā instructed as they departed. “We’ll be back tonight.”

Hana knew it was miles to the old lady’s house. She had travelled this route many times. The native school and the store were along the way, and as they passed by, Hana turned her face. What would Mā do if people noticed them? Where would she say they were going? But no one was about, and they carried on. Beyond the tiny settlement, the long gravel road eventually gave way to a grass track. After that came dense bush.

Although it was overcast, the morning had grown hot. Hana and her brother took turns leading their

mother’s horse. The second horse was loaded with supplies, including the tent Uncle Haki had brought back from the war. They needed it in case the river flooded and they were stranded overnight. Even though they were prepared for the worst, Mā was certain the dark clouds would clear. Hana had never known her mother to be wrong when it came to the weather. Mā had all kinds of ways of knowing. She would feel the early morning grass for dampness, observe the direction of the wind, carefully watch the clouds and the sea.





By mid-morning, they had begun the climb up to the ridge. Here they paused to rest. While they sat, Mā recited the landmarks spread before them in the form of a pātere. “Ka tau taku manu ki te tihi o Tarakoa ...,” she chanted. Some of the places were wāhi tapu, where blood had been shed or there were urupā. Others were hunting or fishing grounds. Then Mā told a story about the taniwha who sometimes lurked in the moana and the awa, pointing out where the water was discoloured or where there was a strong current.

“From maunga, to awa, to moana,” Mā concluded. She pointed but didn’t need to say anything more. Hana and Te Ao knew these were the traditional boundaries of their hapū.



The sun was at its highest by the time they arrived. The whare was in a clearing alongside a well-kept māra and fruit trees. The old lady gave Hana the creeps, so she was relieved when Mā told them to wait outside. They watched as Mā entered the whare, the koha of kai on her back, her arms supporting Rāmahi. Hana sneaked a glimpse of the old lady peering suspiciously, but the piercing green eyes of the tohunga were enough to make the girl turn quickly away.

Hana and Te Ao were hungry, so Hana unpacked the kete filled with kina and the crayfish and dried shark wrapped in old tobacco bags. Then they sat on the ground to eat.

“They say she’s a patupaiarehe,” Te Ao said. “You can’t see her reflection in a mirror.” Hana was sceptical of the rumours – but still, she didn’t dare say anything for fear of being cursed.

They finished eating and began, cautiously, to look around. Mā had told them to be respectful of their surroundings – this was not their kāinga – and not to wander off. But it wasn’t long before curiosity got the better of Te Ao. He tried jumping up to the whare’s small window, then spied an old barrel to stand on.

“She’s doing a karakia – and now she’s got some rongoā,” he reported. “It’s probably poison.” Te Ao peered closer. “Now she’s throwing water on him and massaging his throat. Come and look!” Hana ignored her brother. She didn’t want to look. She wanted to go home.



They waited until Mā and Rāmahi finally came out of the whare. The old lady followed, muttering – her ancient reo poetic but incomprehensible.

“Hoake tātou,” Mā said. She carried a sack that overflowed with some kind of leaves that Hana had never seen before. “We need to get back. Rāmahi must rest.”



It was dinnertime, two days after their visit to the tohunga. Since their return, Rāmahi hadn't improved, and Mā was tense. Hana was helping the little ones, who were distracted and chattering.

“Hoihoi!” Mā commanded. Then the expression on her face and the tone of her voice suddenly changed. “Haere mai ki te kai, son.”

Rāmahi had stumbled into the silent kitchen, obviously still weak – but he was up. “Māmā, can we get some Pākehā bread from the store tomorrow?” he asked. Everyone laughed – the sound filling the whare, filling Hana's ears and her heart.

AUTHOR NOTE:

When Māori were unwell, they traditionally consulted a tohunga. This was a healer who knew which plants and herbs (known as rongoā) cured illness. In 1907, the New Zealand government passed the Tohunga Suppression Act. This made it illegal to use rongoā, and tohunga who did so could be fined or sent to prison. However, many Māori continued to consult tohunga. To protect the tohunga, these visits would often be in secret.



Tohunga

by Potiki

illustrations by Andrew Burdan

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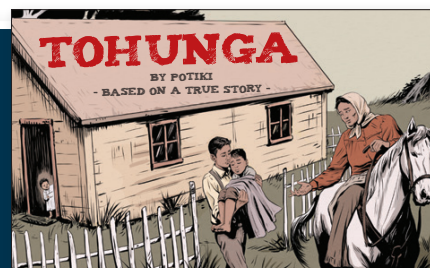
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2



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