

ANCESTORS

BY SIMONE KAHO



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"I heard the ghosts once," he said. "In Tonga. It was a night a bit like this."

Harry and I looked at each other. What? Dad's comment seemed a bit random, but he didn't usually say a lot. We wanted to hear.

"What happened?" Harry asked.

"A young man in our village died," Dad said. "The women let their hair hang loose, and we wore our ta'ovala. There was a huge funeral with drums."

Dad tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair.

"Family came from far away to make the 'umu, and after the funeral, we all feasted. But we could still hear drumming. It was coming from the bush. My uncle said there was probably a celebration in the next village – or maybe someone had died there too. The drumming went into the night."

Dad's nose glowed orange in the light of the fire. Behind him, the dark trees moved.

"The next day, we went to the village. The people said no one had died. There hadn't been a funeral ... or a celebration."

We waited for Dad to go on, but he stayed quiet.

"So who was drumming, Dad?" I asked.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Duh!"

Dad looked at me. "The ghosts," he said. "Our ancestors were grieving." He got up from his chair with a squeak. He was done. "Night," he called, walking off to his tent.

"Is that it?" I said.

Harry laughed. "I guess that's Dad's idea of a ghost story."

A weird noise made me jump. It sounded like a frog, but bigger ... or was it a branch snapping? Or maybe it was a really big frog, a branch-sized frog. An image of our ancestors crept into my mind. They had dark, round eyes and wide-open mouths like taniwha. Their faces retreated into hoods. Black capes whirled; skeletal fingers crept from sleeves. Now they were Dementors.

Harry poked the embers and dropped his stick. "I'm going to bed," he said. He got up and walked away with the torch.

I leapt up, almost falling head first into the fire. "Wait for me," I yelled. Harry spun around with a monster face. His nostrils were all red and veiny. His eyes were scrunched and evil. "Stop it!" I yelled. He laughed and bounced along like a disconnected head, still holding the torch under his chin. Then he flicked it off.

It was so dark I thought I'd been swallowed in a Dementor's mouth. The fear was like a head rush from standing too quickly. I yelled and lurched forward, grabbing Harry's arm. He laughed and switched the torch back on.

Our tent appeared in front of us, big and safe and orange. I scrambled with the zip and threw myself inside, burrowing deep into my sleeping bag. I covered my head and shut my eyes tight. Harry turned off the torch, and the red behind my eyes went black.

In the darkness and warmth of my bag, I realised I needed the loo. "Harry," I whispered. My voice was high and needy. He wouldn't like that. "Come to the toilets with me?"



"No way, José," he said. Now my bladder felt like an over-filled water balloon.

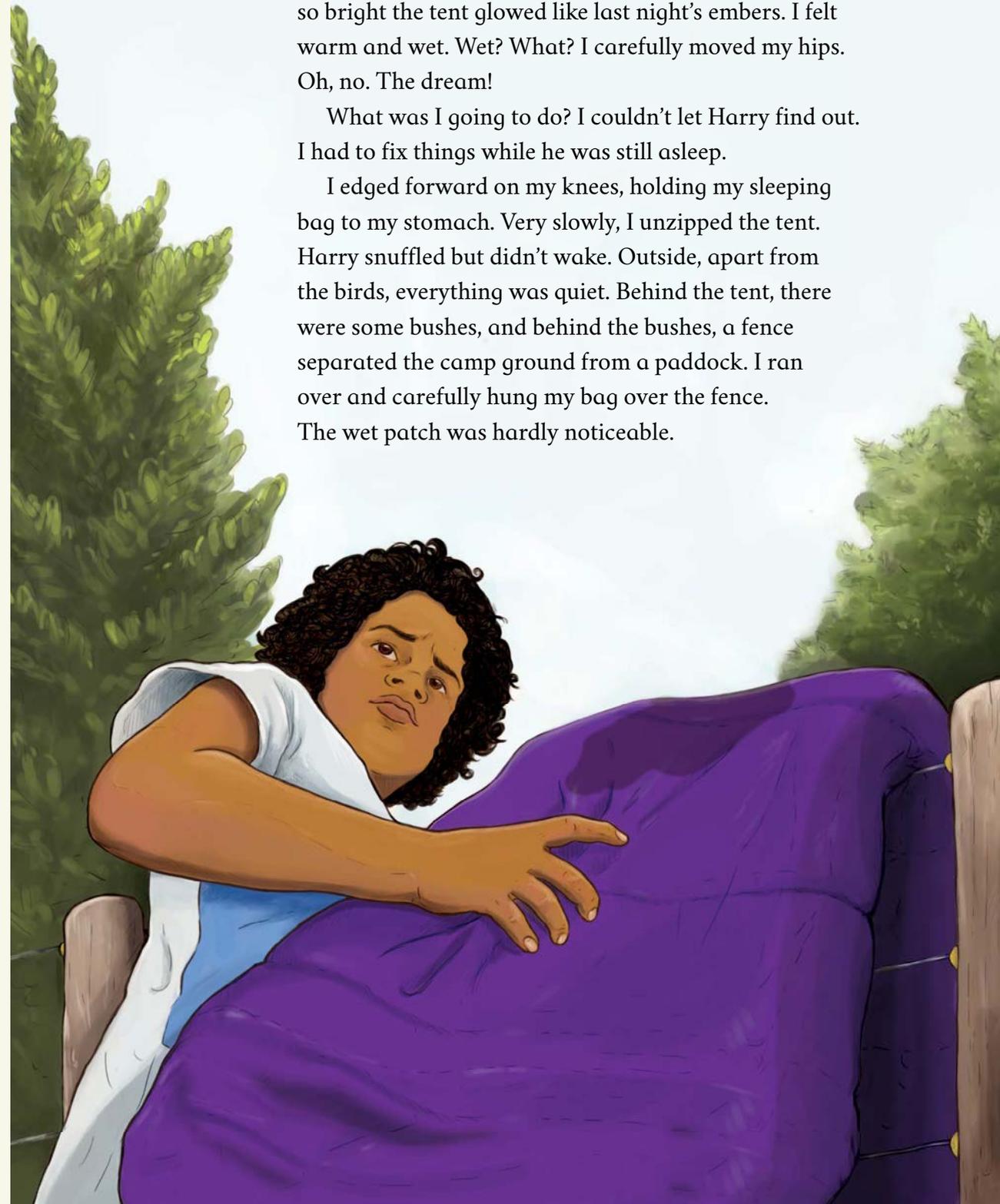
I thought about grabbing the torch and sprinting to the loo, but going outside, alone, would be an open invitation to the ghosts. The trees behind our tent rustled. They were walking around! And in the distance, I was sure I could hear drumming.

I stayed awake for a long time. Finally, I fell asleep and dreamt I went to the toilet after all. On my own. What a relief.

In the morning, I was woken by a tūi. The sun was so bright the tent glowed like last night's embers. I felt warm and wet. Wet? What? I carefully moved my hips. Oh, no. The dream!

What was I going to do? I couldn't let Harry find out. I had to fix things while he was still asleep.

I edged forward on my knees, holding my sleeping bag to my stomach. Very slowly, I unzipped the tent. Harry snuffled but didn't wake. Outside, apart from the birds, everything was quiet. Behind the tent, there were some bushes, and behind the bushes, a fence separated the camp ground from a paddock. I ran over and carefully hung my bag over the fence. The wet patch was hardly noticeable.



At breakfast, Dad watched as I ate my banana sandwich. Finally, he spoke. "You had a bit of trouble last night?" He nodded towards the fence in case I didn't get his meaning.

I swallowed my mouthful of bread and banana and changed the subject. "Dad, are the ancestors like Dementors?"

Dad looked surprised. "Of course not! Your ancestors are family – your grandparents' parents and their parents and way, way back." He smiled. "Even though you've never met, your ancestors love you and watch over you."

"I wish I'd thought of that last night," I said.

Harry flopped into the chair beside me. He grinned. "What's up with the sleeping bag, John?"

I said nothing.

"A scaredy-cat and a bed wetter!"

I stood up and threw my sandwich on the ground. He always had to be mean. "Yeah, well at least I can climb trees," I yelled, feeling mean myself. I took off towards the tallest tree in the camp. I ran so fast the ground blurred.

I reached the tree and leapt into the branches like a monkey. It's where I belong, hidden among the leaves. But not Harry. He's afraid of heights, though he won't admit it. He's determined to be better than me at everything. I was halfway up when I heard something below: Harry, pulling himself up through the branches. He was climbing hard but clumsily, stepping on my hand as he passed by.

I should have told him to be careful, but instead, I climbed higher and faster, too. The branches stuck out like spokes, each one leading easily to the next. A spiral staircase. We hauled ourselves up and up. We climbed so high the trunk became no thicker than my leg.

Way below, I could hear Dad calling out, but it was too late to listen now.



Suddenly a branch snapped – not one I was holding. Harry yelped and slid down the trunk towards me. It wasn't far, but it was enough to freak him out. His shoe was in front of my face, scrabbling for a foothold. I wrapped a hand round his leg to steady him and put his foot on a branch. Eventually, Harry's face appeared next to mine. He was panting like a dog. His breath smelt like banana.

So this is what Harry looks like when he's frightened. For some reason, I smiled. Harry looked shocked, but then he smiled, too. Slowly, without talking, we climbed down together.

At the bottom, Dad hugged me so tight I was almost winded. Then he hugged Harry.

"You boys could've been killed! I thought I was going to have to scrape you off the ground." He sounded more relieved than angry, which wasn't what I expected.

As we walked back, Harry caught my eye.

"Thanks, John," he said quietly.

I shrugged. "Don't thank me," I said.

"Thank our ancestors."



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by Simone Kaho

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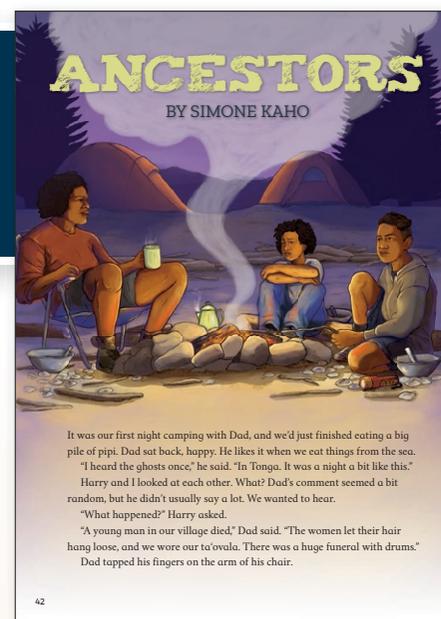
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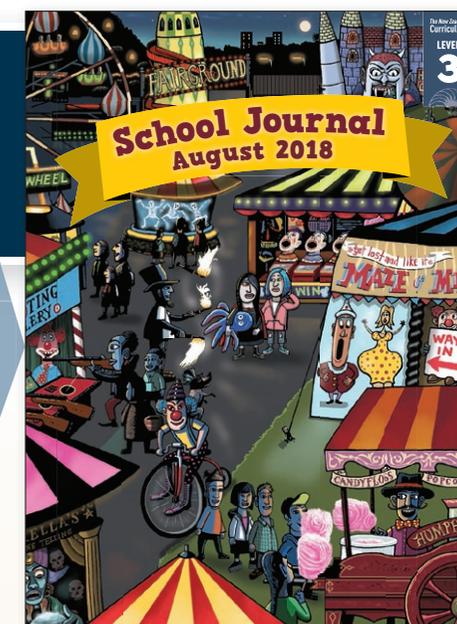
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