

Fleet of Foot

by Paula Morris



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“Wait until that cheeky boy comes home at Easter,” Grandpa said. “He just tinkers about with cars all day and spends his money going to the pictures – he’s forgotten what hard work is.”

But when Tame did come home, they gave him piles to eat, and the hardest work he did was fix Grandma’s radiogram. I loved it when Tame was back, and I especially loved it when he talked about Auckland. “You’d be happy there,” he told me. “You could deliver newspapers every day before school and earn enough for a bike. All the roads in Auckland are sealed. You can go fast and not fall off.”

After that, I badgered Mum until she finally agreed we should move as well. She missed Tame. I was turning twelve, and Aunt Rita said there was a school ten minutes’ walk from their house and I wouldn’t have to wade across a river to get to it. Grandma and Grandpa were sad we were leaving, too – but everyone said it was the right thing to do.

“Best for the boys,” Grandma said, sniffing back tears while she made us ham sandwiches to eat on the bus. Then she marked up the Farmers catalogue with things for Mum to send back once we’d saved enough money.





There were seven of us in the house in Auckland, everyone coming and going and not enough room for us to sit round the table at the same time. Aunty Rita worked as a machinist and brought home fabric offcuts. She and Mum made us fancy shirts. My cousin Cissy sold nighties the colour of candy floss in the George Court department store on K Road. I'd sometimes visit her after school to ride up and down in the big lift with caged doors. At first, the man who worked the doors told me to clear off, but Cissy had a word, and then he looked the other way.

Our other cousin Dee had an even better job as an usherette at the Britannia picture theatre. On Saturday afternoons, she'd let me and Barry in through the back door for the matinée. If we were lucky, she'd get us free ice creams as well.

Barry was my best friend. I met him at my new school, which had lots of kids and water fountains and a jungle gym. The worst thing was we all had to wear shoes, though we chucked them at lunchtime. I liked to walk home in bare feet, too, once I got used to the hot asphalt.

Lots of boys from school lived close by. We climbed fences to take short cuts to each other's places. Some Pākehā didn't like it when we dashed past their vegetable patches and wash houses, but we were quick.

"This isn't back home," Tame warned me. "You have to be fast. Pretend every garden is a bull paddock." I knew I'd never be as fast as Tame. "Fleet of foot," Uncle Hone called him.

Uncle Hone had lots of stories, and I wasn't sure what to believe. He told us there was a river underneath Queen Street. "Before the roads and houses, there was water," he said. "Water and ferns and rocks. The river ran from K Road all the way to the sea. In the old days, a hundred years ago, they had to build the shops around it. People crossed the river on planks. They fell in all the time."

"Don't you listen to his nonsense," Mum said. She had a job now behind the counter at the butcher's, wrapping meat

in greaseproof paper and bashing away at the big cash register. Uncle Hone joked that she couldn't get away from cows.

"At least the shop doesn't smell of them," she said. When I visited after school, Mr Hutchins the butcher would give me a free slice of luncheon sausage to eat on the spot. Every week, Mum got her money in a brown envelope. Seven of us in the house, she said, and six already earning money. Soon we'd be rolling in it, especially once Tame had learnt his trade.





Most nights, I was Mum's errand boy, racing up to the dairy. But sometimes, Tame beat me to it. He was used to darting between cars and buses. "And I've got the longest legs," he said.

"The emptiest legs," Mum would reply because Tame was always hungry, always on the go. He complained that his apprenticeship meant a lot of standing around or lying under the hot bellies of cars. Tame wanted more excitement, more action. He was always after the next thing.

"Is there really a river under Queen Street?" I asked him one Friday night. He was sitting on the steps, polishing his shoes, getting ready to go dancing with our cousins. He couldn't answer because a fire engine was roaring along Ponsonby Road: we could both hear its clanging alarm and loud motor.

Tame raised his head as though he was sniffing the wind to work out if the fire was close by. He had a faraway look. "Right," he said. "Time to get moving."

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That Christmas, we went north to visit my grandparents. It felt hotter up there in the windless paddocks, the flies lolling on the windowsills, the river still and brown. The pine trees didn't seem as tall. Cousins were living in our old house. The kids were noisy. They wanted to move to the city as well.

Mum called the trip "going home", but it didn't feel like home any more. Tame hadn't come with us. He was working shifts and couldn't take time off. He'd given up the apprenticeship and was training to be a fireman. His Christmas Day would be spent polishing the big fire engines, waiting for the bell to ring. Tame was living at the station. We didn't see much of him these days. Grandma and Grandpa said they didn't mind him not coming home for the holidays, but I could tell Mum did. She thought we should all be together. And she worried that Tame's job was too dangerous.

"He'll be all right," I told her. "He can run faster than any fire." That made Mum laugh, though later, I saw her wiping away tears.

When we got to the farm, one of the first things I'd wanted to do was visit the milking shed. Just before Tame moved to Auckland, Grandpa had laid a new concrete floor. Tame wanted to have a look before the concrete dried, and I was hanging off the fence, waiting. He came racing out, bursting with laughter, then wiped his feet in the long grass. Grandpa only noticed the prints once Tame had gone. He measured all our feet to see who was to blame.

Tame's footprints were still there. I stood in them, wriggling my toes until they were coated with pale dust. His feet were still bigger than mine, the way his legs were longer.

"This boy misses the farm," Grandma said when I was back at the house, eating her biscuits. "Soon as he arrives, he can't wait to get into that milking shed!"

Grandpa said nothing. His hand was heavy on my shoulder, and we didn't meet each other's eyes. I never told him that Tame was the one who spoilt the new concrete, but I'm pretty sure he knew.



illustrations by Andrew Burdan

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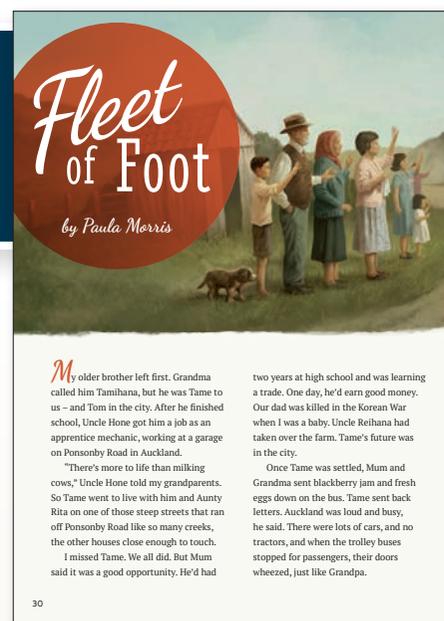
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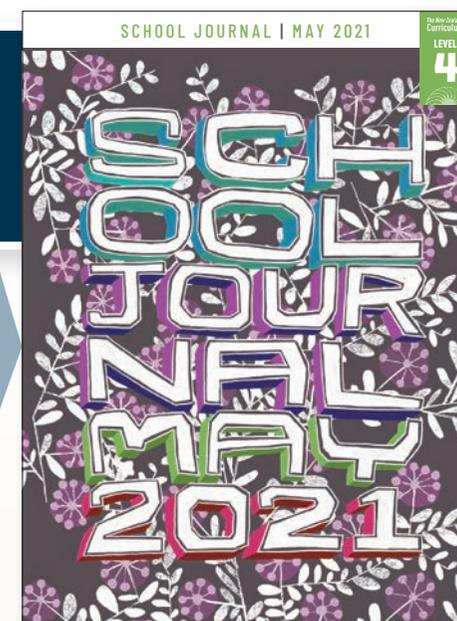
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