

# Grow Big

*Kāore te kūmara e korero mō tōna ake reka  
The kūmara doesn't speak of its own sweetness*

by Paula Morris (Ngāti Wai, Ngāti Whātua)



This story imagines what life was like for Ngāti Wai tūpuna on the east coast of Northland in the late 1700s.

When Moka woke up, he knew it was going to be a busy day. His koro said that this time of year was called **Whiringa-ā-Nuku**. The cold days of **takurua** were over, and the earth was warm again. It was time to plant food for the rest of the year.

“E **moko**, we need you today,” said Koro. “You have to be strong and work hard.”

Moka nodded, but deep down he wasn't sure. His friend Tai was the strong one. Moka was small for his age. And skinny.

“One day you'll grow big,” his mother always said. Moka hoped that was true.

The first jobs began as soon as the sun rose.

“You fetch the water, Moka,” his mother said.

She handed him a **tahā**. When it was empty, Moka liked to drum on its hard skin with his hands.

“Stop making so much noise!” said his older sister Pae. She thought she knew everything. “And don't spill the water this time.”

Moka ran off towards the stream. The ground felt soft and dewy under his feet. As he ran, he dodged everything in his way: a dog flopping in a muddy puddle, the post where they hung **kete** of food, the trap built to catch **kiore**. The tūi in the trees sounded like a crowd cheering him on.

The stream was cold and clear. In the summer, Moka spent many evenings there trying to catch eels. His father showed him how to find juicy grubs on pūriri trees. The grubs were bait, hooked onto the end of a line and tied to a stick. His father let the line dangle in the water and chanted, soft and low. Whenever he caught an eel, he would hang it to dry in the **raumati** sun. Drying the eels made them last for months. They would be stored and then eaten through the cooler, darker nights.

**Whiringa-ā-Nuku:** Fifth month of the Māori year; around October  
**takurua:** winter

**moko:** grandchild  
**tahā:** a water container made from the hard shell of the Polynesian gourd

**kete:** basket  
**kiore:** Polynesian rats  
**raumati:** summer

Today, Moka's friend Tai was already at the stream, crouched on a rock. His two tahā looked full.

"Only one?" he shouted to Moka. "You need to be strong like me."

Moka sighed. Tai was so tall, with thick arms and legs. Still, Moka could see that Tai was struggling with the heavy tahā.

"See how strong I am," Tai called. He stood up and lifted the tahā over his head.

Moka filled his tahā to the top, but it was heavier than he expected. He tried to lift it up like Tai, but it slipped from his grasp and plopped into the water.

Tai burst into laughter. Moka jumped into the stream and grabbed the tahā before it bobbed away. He knew he would get into big trouble if he lost it.

Climbing back up the hill was hard work. Moka took his time, careful not to slosh the water. He knew Tai would be back at the marae, bragging to everyone about what had happened. He tried to forget about it. "He iti, he iti kahikātoa," his father always said. The mānuka tree might be small, but its wood is strong.



At the whare, everyone was busy.

"You have a big job today," his mother told him. "We're going to clear the ground up the hill for planting kūmara."

Kūmara! That was Moka's favourite food of all. Sweet, smoky kūmara cooked deep in the ground was the best meal.

Moka could smell the smoke already. It wafted down from the hill where some of his cousins were burning away the low bush. This was the first step in clearing the land. Moka's mother carried a toki on her shoulder. The adults used these tools to break the soil and dig out roots.

Koro and Pae followed, both hauling kete of sand.

"Let me help you," Moka said, but Koro shook his head.

"Too heavy for you."

Everything was too hard or too heavy for Moka. All he wanted to do was help. Up at the field, Tai was busy smashing clumps of dirt – showing off, again.

"I have another job for you boys," his mother said. "We need you to spread the ashes from the fires. Let all that heat soak in."

"I thought the earth was already warm?" Moka asked.

"It is," said his mother. "But kūmara like it really, really warm."

"Moka, let's have a contest," said Tai. "I bet I'll be faster than you."

"You will not!" Moka argued.



Koro leaned close, gesturing at Tai. “**He kai ā-waha**,” he whispered, and Moka smiled. Tai really did have a bragging mouth.

For the rest of the day, everyone worked together in the field – digging and smashing or spreading sand and ash. Tai grabbed big handfuls of ash and tossed them over the garden. But because he didn’t mix it into the soil, half of the ash was blown away. Moka pretended that he was a kiore, small and quick. He raced up and down the rows on all fours, spreading the ash and patting it into the soil.

It was a long, long day. That night, around the fire, Moka’s arms and legs ached.

Koro patted him on his shoulder. “You were the hardest worker today,” he said. “We’ll have a good crop because of you.”

Moka smiled. He hoped the kūmara on the hill were warm under their blanket of ash.

“Grow big, kūmara,” he whispered into the night sky.

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**He kai ā-waha:** food of the mouth – a whakataukī (saying) applied to people who brag a lot. Gathering food takes lots of hard work, but a bragger’s achievements are all in their talk.



illustrations by Josh Morgan