

## A lesson

by

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Māui is sulky, distinctly discontent.

His shoulders droop - infinitesimally, but for one who knows him well, there's no question. He nods twice, and a handful of bright, karaka berries appear in his open palm. Magic! He tosses them to the soil. Then nods twice again: this time, a practically translucent piece of Kahurangi Pounamu appears. It's a marvel of purity, the very clearness of a still sky. He doesn't look - it merely joins the berries, a vivid green on dry, uninviting earth.

Murirangawhenua's tongue clicks at the waste, but she says nothing. A sullen face squints at the clouds.

'Hai! I wish there was something *good* to wish for.'

The grandmother does not point out how ridiculous, or petulant, this sounds. Instead, she holds out her gnarled hands and touches him, the warm touch of one ancestor to another.

'Come, I'll take you to a place where you'll *learn* something.'

The grandmother is so senior, she has no need to nod. She *thinks*, and her thoughts hold such cadence that

Māui is transported *instantly* to the place of which she speaks.

Nine islands. Mystical - almost as beautiful as Aotearoa itself. Golden sands, shorelines stretching forever.

Rising high, high into the sky is Mauna Kea, a terrible volcano, echoed by similar peaks – Wai'ale'ale,

Haleakalā, Kīlauea, Hualālai, all roiling with magma, ready, on the slightest whisper, to erupt. When the time is right, they'll burst into flames as bright as Mahuika's mountain.

Murirangawhenua murmurs that even under the sea, Lōihi is a volcanic secret, waiting, rippling, steaming, bubbling, biding her time. It's hot, and the oceans are a brilliant blue, breath-taking indigo - cobalt. Māui notices that Mount Wai'ale'ale on Kaua'i, is drenched in rain, rivulets rushing in a swoosh of wild wet, creating vast areas of green bog, festooned with plants he's never seen or imagined in his life. There're sweeping, heart stopping, breath-taking drops: the rainforest is bountiful and generous, yielding pleasures Māui could never think to wish for: papaya, banana, citrus, avocado - coconuts too large to hold.

The thing that strikes him most, however, is the birdsong. He hears a symphony that is at once exotic and familiar, strange, yet resonant. It's entralling. The ancestor watches him, satisfied.

'What's this, I hear?'

'These birds are called by many names,' Murirangawhenua answers.

'Those that sail ships with tall masts and huge, billowing sails, call them francolins and egrets, geese and stilts, cardinals, rock doves, albatross, petrel, black crowned night heroes, honey creepers and mynah birds.

The people of these places *love* this sound. It's their music - a beautiful, twittering, tweeting chorus in the skies and the forests, on land and on sea.'

'What do *they* name these birds, the people from... *here*?'

‘Oh, the names are almost as beautiful as the calls themselves. Listen, Māui... akiapolaau, apapane, elepaio, akiapolaau, amakihi, akepa, omao, nukupu'u and i'iwi – you can hear them all, if you open your ears, as the people do!’

So Māui listens, quite enthralled. There is the short warble cheedle-ee, warba-warba and pi-er ieu of a bird that is a chubby white and yellow with a slightly orange head and the most distinctive curved beak. He flutters off, and Māui’s attention is caught by a brilliant yellow fledgeling – tiny, with little brown feet arched nonchalantly over a thin twig. The creature’s joined by several more, until the bright orange akepa, yellow beaked with verdant green at its wingtips, joins the company. The yellow birds – the amakihi – fly away, perhaps in indignation.

Māui laughs. Two confident geese, plumed in beiges and cremes, strut below. They’re not so pretty as the akiapola’au, a little creature with lilac wings and a butter creamy front, crested with yellow, but they have character.

‘Look above you!’

Māui looks, seeing ‘io’- a hawk, fearsome in phased colours of browns and creams. Intelligent – very intelligent – eyes. They glint black in a feathered head, finished with a wicked beak.

All the songs are wild, rich - pure. The colours are as beautiful as the twitter, feathers in all shapes and sizes, downy, long, fluffy and rigid. Māui notices beaks of myriad shapes and claws of fascinating colours and curves, some outstretched, some arched. There are birds with adorable tufts, then little chicks cheep - cheeping with hardly a hint of fluff.

‘Oh, what birds! Ka Pai!’ Māui cannot help exclaiming. One of the hosts, standing next to Murirangawhenua, bids him welcome. ‘They sound beautiful,’ the man agrees. We listen for these magical resonances all the time. Listen – yes, listen, I think one flies over the sea.’

Māui does not need to *listen*, so much as *see* – there’s currently a *huge* bird in front of them, flying with the most immense wings – white, trimmed on the edges with black –spectacular.

“Yes, I see!’

The man looks at him strangely.

‘Birds cannot be *seen*, Māui! They are only heard.’

‘What nonsense is this! How can you say that? *Look!*’

Māui can hardly breathe with excitement. He’s seeing the most phenomenal bird he’s ever seen in the whole, immense horizon of his existence. The wingspan is breath-taking, if a little frightening!

He points at another, shy little thing. The colour is so vivid, it puts even Tamanuiterā’s brilliant sunsets to shame. Almost the entire bird is orange – beyond vivid, with a most wonderful beak, curved, in matching shade. Only the wing feathers have any contrast - white striped through brown. Undoubtedly, the most stunning sight Māui has ever witnessed. (Barring a few others he is forgetting in his excitement, but there’s no need to quibble.)

Murirangawhenua tells him that this bird is one of the most special of this place. It is terribly lucky he’s spotted it – it’s usually located much higher, in the great forests. ‘I’m not hearing it,’ the man comments, slightly puzzled.

“There! There it is!”

“But you can’t *see* birds’ the man asserts, again. He wonders if Māui is a little deranged.

Māui looks at the man and wonders the same thing.

How it is he's not seeing what is in front of his nose? Perhaps he's blind? Māui peers at him, his topknot collapsing into his face as usual. He pushes it back.

The man points to the wharf.

'Look how high the waves are, today! The winds are rising.'

"You see the waves?"

The chief regards Māui strangely. He *again* wonders if the young man is mad. Māui wonders the same thing - especially as blindness is evidently not the problem.

Murirangawhenua explains. 'Māui, the people of these lands are gifted with birdsong, but they are not gifted with the ability to *see* birds. That is the prerogative of gods.'

"Are you telling me his wise man can't see what I can?"

"He can't, but he can *hear* the brilliant sounds!"

"But that's not fair! He can't see the reds and the golds, the fluff and the feathers, the beaks and the bills?"

'No!

'Is this true?' Māui asks the chief.

'Yes, it is true.'

Māui is outraged, then sad. Murirangawhenua looks at him strangely. Māui feels his jawbone hum with anticipation, thrum with expectation... He understands. He nods his head with intent, and the man's eyes widen.

Behind him, children squeal with excitement and women set their bundles down, shading their eyes toward the horizon. “I can see! I can see them!” The man shouts.

There is a tremendous commotion as all the people begin to notice, clapping their hands so hard the beautiful birds rise into the sky, frightened off their branches, cheep cheeping, chrrrup chirruping and in all ways presenting the most spectacular sight – colour, movement, power and, in some cases, some quite incredible sweetness.

Beside them, a tiny chick cheeps. It is cracking open its shell, hatching into an adorable, fluffy bundle of new life.

The man’s eyes glimmer. Soon, a single tear is wiped impatiently from his cheek, rolling down

‘Thank you, he says, for this sight.’

“It is my pleasure,” says Māui - and means it.

This place, this world, Hawaii, speaks his name still.

He’s known there as Māui, revelator of birds. Since that time, every chirruping bird, in all of those magnificent islands, can be seen by all. It’s a miracle told and retold in all of the stories and all of the legends of those people.

Murirangawhenua gently eases him back to Hawaiiki, the birthplace.

“You wanted something good to wish for, and you got your wish.”

‘Yes.’

‘Divinity is best used sparingly. It’s wasted on trickery.’

‘True’

‘So when is it best used?’

“When it brings joy to a whole people!”

‘True.’ (Incandescent smile.) ‘Anything else?’

Māui groans.

‘You want me to say you were right, don’t you? You were right. Thought, effort, intention and good will is better than tomfoolery.’

‘Well done, Māui. I’m pleased. Now no more of your tricks.’

Murirangawhenua touches him and he warms. The warmth embeds, deep and pure. Long after she’s gone, it remains.

The jawbone of the ancestor nestles comfortably.