

The Hikoi
by Wharerangi Turnbull

E hoki ki o maunga kia purea ai koe e nga hau o Tawhirimatea.

Pupuhi ana te hau as it howled and hurled a heavy hitting mist to kiss the cold red lips pursed under a deep dark hood as he stepped clear from the beaten old sheep shagger.

“All good?...”

“Yeah...”

The tattooed fist stalled then pulled hard on the long rusty gear stick. Precise pedal pushing propelled the small vessel away down the puddle riddled road. The tail lights lost in the frost and morning mist disappearing into the white like a kite in a cloud.

“Good fulla ay?”

“You’re just lucky he was going this way or you would’ve been walking”

“Bro you’re the one who’s lucky, it’s not like you would’ve made it this far alone” he thought to himself.

A pause and long silence haunted the country road. Something and nothing in every direction all at once. The unseen lay only meters in front but no chance of spotting anything further into the mist than arms reach. The taste of morning dew in the air and the smell of country cow shit overwhelmed the senses. A familiarity only known to him in a past life. A thick misty haze cloaked the land almost as if trying to keep the earth covered and warm while it waited for daylight’s touch. A lone brick chimney stood solitary in the paddock nearby. Its fires long since extinguished and unstoked for many years. The last remnants of the old home now a scratching post for the bulls that claimed the land, devoured the grass and turned the soils to mud. If only the land could speak it would shoo these invaders away.

“Oh don’t let me slow you down champ”

“Yeah...”

Mana gave a quick shiver and pulled his hood down over the brow of his navy blue beanie. Adjusting his back pack straps he clutched his canteen and they set off on the trail crunching shingle and mussel shells under foot.

It was a cool, calm mid-winter morn in the valley as the two meandered down the lonesome lane. After some time the silence broke...

“You look like your mum”

“Nah, everyone says I look like you”

“Nah, you’d be lucky on that one boy”

A smirk shot across his face. It felt good.

“What you smiling for”

So he stopped. Quiet again.

The shingle spread became sporadic as they got further from the main drag. Pretty much dirt by the time they reached the base. The summit still hidden in the misty korowai draped over the whenua. The ngahere breathed in every life giving droplet as it stood indifferent to the plains that surrounded the mountain. Ancient and timeless it extend up into the clouds as a fortress to test those that enter and protect those that stayed.

“Aren’t you gonna say anything”

“I already did”

“I didn’t hear it”

“I said it to myself”

The old path overgrown and shadowed by the canopy above wound its way up and out of the damp cold morning air. Insects clicked and birds stalked at the sound of moving men. The mokomoko hid from the dancing fantail as it perched above a knotted vine. A guide for Mana as he moved through the space. He pulled back his hood to show his face.

He run his fingers passed an older branch as if to mihi it, he felt the pāhau and remembered how out of reach these were as a kid. Grown now and the pathway not walked since then it still felt familiar and safe as each inner corner kinked over a small stream and every outer turn was held firm by a staunch native entrenched in the earth. The laughter shared on these walks echoed in his heart and mind. A shift to a simpler time where his soul could walk in peace. Breathing hard his lungs filled with the wairua of the forest. Every breath an exchange of life. Every breath connecting him home. He clutched his canteen as the incline sharpened upward.

“You’re tired boy, have a rest”

“.....I’m all good”

The pair moved through like spectres in the misty wood. The fantail flicked itself from tree to tree and danced its way through the filtering light above. The jagged rocks at the pathway edges lay hidden in the shaded dark but glistened at different angles as they moved higher up the maunga. The sunlight casting dual shadows across the winding path. The forest loomed above like an unspeaking guardian, alive and effortless in it’s care of those below.

“Slow down boy, it’s not a race”

“I’m all good bro”

His pack was feeling heavy now. The weight of everything inside was a burden. It had been a long trip down from Tamaki only to then be asked to go further with not even a days’ notice.

He’d already missed the tangihanga and now this bush trek with the old boy “holy wreck” he

thought to himself. “Why would he ask me to do this? No one’s been up here in ages”

One foot in front of the other the pathway lightened as the tree cover thinned coming closer to the summit. The sun almost in full view as the path turned to long grass blissfully blown by the wind sweeping across and over the mountain top. Tirairaka paused just a few branches back into the bush and Mana removed his hat.

Canteen in hand he edged closer to the jutting rock that designated the highest point of their maunga. He stepped into the full light of the sun and his shadow fell behind into the cold embrace of the forest.

“Kei te pai koe?”

“.....ae”

Mana paused at the base of the jutting kohatu. He unshackled the weight of his pack and it dropped to the ground. His feet firm and connected to his whenua. He looked back over the forest and saw the thick mist still blanketing the earth and trees below. A view he’d not seen since he was young. One he’d thought he’d never see again. A warm tear swelled in the corner of his eye and a cool wind blew it from his face.

Ka hoki ōna mahara ki te wā hikoi haere ana tōna papa i tenei whenua. Nga kōrero tuku iho mo te rongoa i roto i te taiao. Te ataahua o te whenua me te haumarua o te wharua.

Hotuhotu ana te whatumanawa. It’s been so long.

“Too long son, I’m ready now”

He lifted the canteen to his chest and unscrewed the lid. The contents shifted as he leaned it over and the ash spilled out into the wind. It blew back across the plains and settled where it needed. He sat for a bit. The ancestral winds of home listened to his heart as it moved around him. Recognising his face. Knowing but not judging, only accepting.

The hikoi back down was quiet. Mana made it back to the main road as the scarlet hue grew in the western sky. Uncles ute pulled up and the door swung open for Mana to jump in.

“Your dad go off alright?”

“Ae....Kei te pai ia”