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Hū

The walls felt as if they were caving in on me, wrapping me up tighter than my mum did before she left me. Institutionalisation, colonization, since starting at Wayvalley High School in a rather wealthy area, I was a target. Skin so dark you'd think I was misplaced, like an abnormal white zebra with only one black stripe that ran right down its spine. Yes, I was the stripe. School was like my father, Jim Turia's house. A place only known by 5 years old Kahu, but never forgotten after 10 whole years. Which was surprising seeing as my memory is quite bad, unless you want me to discuss the impact colonisation has had on my people and our country. Anyway, I'm sitting here amongst a flock of doves with uniforms that their parents probably washed every day. Well compared to mine anyway, my dress shirt has never seen an iron before and my pants look like Uncle Riki's bum, saggy. Don't get me started on my shoes, I walk in the house with bare feet every day, so Uncle doesn't have to spend more money on another pair. I always laugh because Mrs Sherman is the epitome of my school shoes. Worn out, broken and ready to give in, though some how she still manages to walk her way through each day. She's my music teacher, a 40ish year old Pākehā woman that looks at me like Uncle Riki's boss looks at him. Oh yeah Uncle Riki, you could say he's my father. He took me in after my mother and biological dad passed on, which I'm truly grateful for.

Anyway, school is pretty straightforward. All of my teachers, who might I add are all Pākehā, stare at me every once in a while, like I'm capable of nothing and maybe that is because I did nothing in their classes. I mean, who wants to sit in rows, alone, for hours on end, and starve till lunch break. Not me that's for sure. And it's only been four weeks since starting high school. I've learnt the same amount as I have friends. Which is kore. Kore means nothing by the way. Something my teachers think I have a lot of in my head. When

in fact, my understanding and knowledge regarding how they came here and the hardship my culture has been through because of their kind, is quite astonishing. Not that they ever asked me how academically in tune I am, I mean I'd rather not have to communicate with them.

Monday mornings always start with a bit of music class, and it gave me an excuse to listen to Te Matatini performances. The past few weeks have been quite repetitive, everyone knows what seat mine is and not to sit in it. They also know that it is a good idea not to converse with me unless they want to talk about giving me back my land. Other than that, I've been doing my own thing and don't worry much about the mahi seeing as I'm allowed to do my assignments in te reo Māori. They just send it away to get marked as well, typical for this school seeing as I'm the token brown boy. Looked at like I'm an exchange student, in my own country. Don't get me wrong, there are other Māori students here. They're just watered down and white washed. I'd throw a lazy pukana at them sometimes too, just to remind them that traditional Māori are still alive and thriving.

Who am I kidding, no one really took notice of me anyway, but I liked it that way. Sometimes I did wish I had someone to pass me the ball at lunch time rather than the backboard, but it didn't bother me that much. I am who I am, and I told Uncle Riki that my mana and nature wouldn't change or adapt for anyone or any school and he didn't mind at all.

It's Monday morning, fifth week of term 1 and class starts the same. Mrs Sherman does the role, my name mispronounced once again, bruising the insides of my hands because I can't help but clench my fists at her effortless attempt to pronounce my name right. Then the talking begins, that's usually the sign to put my headphones in and enter Te Matatini Ki Te Ao. "Kahu", I hear as I've almost completely shut out of te ao Pākehā. "Kahu?", Mrs Sherman calls to me again, this time with a smirk on her face, the kind of same face Uncle Riki's boss makes at him when orders him to do the kaka jobs. Kaka, yeah that basically means shit. "Kahu, are you listening?" I tried to act as if I couldn't hear her when her dominant voice was well and truly piercing into my ears. I had a choice to keep my head down or acknowledge her call. My

head twitched in embarrassment and my body began quivering like it was cold, though the sun was definitely bringing on quite a bit of sweat as I realised it was me she was calling to. Shit, there went my eyes, revealed to the whole class. One pair faced towards Mrs Sherman and 27 pairs all on me. The same feeling hit me as hard as my father did. I never understood how overwhelming it was to have this much attention brought on me, or any for that matter. Out of nowhere my mouth opened, “yes” I called in response. At this point I felt I lost all control of my body, as my father did. The class was just as shocked as I was to hear a word let alone breathing from the Māori boy in the back corner of the room.

“Kahu, can you please explain to me what this music video is trying to portray? This was the homework for last week”. Not once had I ever laid an eye on her or even held a conversation with her privately let alone in front of the whole class, nor did I even have my head up as if I wanted to be approached for that matter. I clenched my fists even tighter than before and felt my face warming up like the sun was as close to my cheeks as my hair was. Hidden behind my locks, I thought no one could see me. Hidden in the back of the class, I thought no one would acknowledge me. In fact, the goal was to ensure all of the other students were acknowledged and I was tucked away in the back of the classroom, like all of the Māori resources you can see behind me on the wall and shelves. I never felt so embarrassed, like my father did after ‘punishing me’. Most of the time the punishments had no reasoning whatsoever.

Anyway, as I sit dripping in sweat and in complete disbelief that I had become the focal point of today’s music lesson, I take a deep breath and analyse the situation at hand. Wiping the sweat off of my head I then stand from my seat like my tipuna would if they had too been in an uncomfortable situation likewise. “Well actually Mrs Sherman, the real question is why is it that you ask me a question I clearly have no knowledge of and point me out, out of all people in this room. Knowing well and truly, I am much less engaged in the content you are teaching compared to the rest of the students here. Might I add, yes, I am the one student here who does their assignments in Māori. So, care to explain please?” My mouth continued rambling on like my father’s when something bothered him. I sat back down with my head held high,

however, I was definitely struggling to breathe as millions of emotions hit me all at once, like they did to my father. I began thinking and struggling to understand where this came from, why a simple question was blown out of proportion because I couldn't handle answering something that required one small answer, in which I was capable of if I did the pointless homework.

As the students sat with their mouths wide open at my shocking response to her innocent question, I sat there contemplating why it was me that she had chose. "Capable? I am capable, but Mrs Sherman has no idea. Shy? I am shy, but Mrs Sherman should know. Uncomfortable? I am certainly uncomfortable, and Mrs Sherman can tell." The smirk swept across her face again, this time I acknowledged her presence properly. Nostalgia.

I closed my eyes.

Open.

The walls caving in on me were wrapped in years of my cultural heritage. Skin so dark I wore less to show my stories. Misplaced, was the thoughts in my father's head telling me I was a target. Target, was abolishing the idea that Māori should pick the seat at the back. That seat, has been touched by too many Māori.

The day I chose to break down the walls, reveal my tūpuna, fulfil my place in this world, shoot for the target and stand from the seat to challenge a simple question. Was the day I became Mrs Sherman.

I am Kahu Turia, my students call me Mr Turia. 10 years ago, a European lady challenged me to acknowledge myself and my peers before me who were victims of the "back seat". Capable, Mrs Sherman knew. Shy, Mrs Sherman challenged. Uncomfortable, Mrs Sherman freed.

That smirk, was a smirk so familiar. A smirk only known by 4 years old Kahu. A smirk that caused my father heartache and years of pain, pain known by 5 years old Kahu. For years I believed my mother and father had both left this Earth. For years I believed European were misplaced and only here to

cause damage to my people. For years I believed there was no place for Pākehā on this Earth because of my father's actions and words.

Lily Turia was my mother's name, taken after my father when they married 2 years before I was born. For many years I believed my mother lay with her tūpuna, because my father found it too hard to admit that violence and alcohol drove her to leave him and their child. At the age of 6 my father chose to end his life, he had struggled with many issues that my mother nor I could fix. At the age of 15 I witnessed the same smirk so authentic I felt 4 again.

Lily Sherman was my mother's maiden name, and like Mrs Sherman and my shoes, was a young Māori boy wearing them. Worn out, broken and ready to give in, though some how he still managed to walk his way through each day as a Māori in a world so Pākehā.

Those shoes are the same shoes my mother and I continue to challenge within our classes, because it all starts with our rangatahi and that bloody back seat.