

TANIORA WILLIAMS

Strawberry

Peering out from behind the low clouds in the foggy night sky, the full moon's light shone invitingly upon the back doorstep. As I sat under the silver tone of the moon, memories flooded my mind; the times when I was just a little girl eating strawberries that belonged to the crop next door. When no one was looking, I would go to the back of the yard where a tall wooden fence separated our house from the strawberry farm on the other side. If it wasn't such a pretty fence, I would be annoyed with it. But I liked its colour, its smoothness, and its strength.

Nana's lemon tree stood next to a small hole in the fence which was only just big enough for me to fit through. Adjusting my limbs to match the opening, I crawled my way through. Emerging on the other side, the sweet scent of strawberries filled the air as bees went about their business. Quickly, I knelt down, squashing strawberries with my knees that had fallen onto the ground. I always wondered if the farmer knew of my innocent temptation to steal his succulent strawberries.

Held against my body were the strawberries supported by one arm while the other gathered as many as I could. I popped my head back through the hole in the fence to check that Nana's eyes weren't peering into the yard, before I dashed back to the step.

My hands were covered in a shiny red; a syrup-like texture, sticky between my fingers. My legs glistened with the flesh of grazed strawberries. Nana would growl me if she caught me.

"Put that back! Those don't belong to us! What a big mess you've made!" she would often lecture, before insisting I have a bath and wash away my cunning efforts of the day. It wasn't optional. And I would do it, for Nana.

Watching a snail slowly decide its path, I waited for Nana to arrive home. It wouldn't be too long now.

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I gazed at the familiar face of the moon, recognising someone. But I wasn't sure who.

Her bright and kind face illuminated the back door step, welcoming me into the night. She filled the backyard with a knowing and distinctive shade of blue. A blue that made the lemons on the tree shimmer.

The hole in the fence was no longer visible as the branches and leaves from the lemon tree had grown in front of it.

A loud squeaking noise echoed in the distance before Nana's car pulled into the driveway. I always knew Nana was nearly home because she drove an old Ford Fiesta which had an engine that squeaked every time she turned a corner.

"Kia Ora Nana!" I yelled over the top the 60s music that blasted from her car.

"Kia Ora my moko!" Nana opened the car door and grabbed her kete before approaching me with a warm embrace.

"How was your day my moko?" she asked.

"Good" I replied, as always. What do you even say when an adult asks you how your day was?

The following Sunday, Nana shuffled her way inside and into the kitchen escaping from the heat. I followed Nana and tried to keep to the cool shade of her shadow. I made a game of not stepping on the daisies. Inside, Nana stopped at some junk mail collecting dust on the coffee table.

"Have you thought about what cake you want?" she smiled while noticing a big red circle around one cake in particular. I giggled.

"Hehe, yes Nana."

"Good, your thirteenth birthday is only two weeks away now," she remarked.

Pulling an old shoe box out of the cupboard, Nana shuffled through a colourful chaos of papers, ribbons, stickers and sequins.

"Here you go moko," she grinned.

Curious, I took the box from her.

"Invitations!" I beamed.

"Thanks Nana, they look awesome!"

Nana was naturally good with her arts and crafts. Mum always suggested that she should open a store at the local markets and Nana would always refuse.

Dinner, as tradition on a Sunday, was boil up.

Snuggled up in bed, under the fluffy blanket embroidered with cats, I flicked through my birthday invites as the moon watched on in curious interest, lighting my room in her cool yet embracing glow. I fell asleep dreaming of friends, presents and the junk mail cake.

Savoury smells of chicken nibbles navigated through Nana's perfectly pruned rose garden as we sat on the lawn giggling our way through the unwrapping of my gifts. Curious tui perched among the red flowers of the pohutukawa tree unsure but not afraid as Britney Spears disrupted the otherwise quiet cul de sac.

Fiddling with the sellotape and trying not to rip the wrapping (Nana was very strict about reusing wrapping paper) I opened my gift from Rawiri. Red sequins fell out and all I could think was: I hope the tui don't eat them. A pocket diary with crimson thread lining the spine.

While my friends continued to play games, Nana pulled me aside and said that she wanted to show me something. I helped Nana up the step into the lounge.

"This belonged to your mum."

Opening a small wooden box with my mother's initials carved on the side, Nana delicately lifted out a small pounamu necklace. A koru. Growth, regeneration and new beginnings.

"You're growing up now bub, and you're going to be experiencing lots of change. Your mother wanted you to have this."

Nana tenderly lifted my hair and placed it around my neck. I liked it, but by now I just wanted to go back outside and play. Running back to my friends, I noticed Nana behind me still sitting. She looked sad. Distant.

Another humid Sunday evening and a lone tui fussed about in the garden. The vegetables were going to seed. Nana was down at the Four Square getting the last bits and bobs for tonight's boil up. I was in charge of peeling and cutting the potatoes. Looking out of the kitchen window, I noticed the strawberry fields appearing relieved as the night approached. A glimmer of red caught my eye; I thought I could see one of the last strawberries still clinging to the yellowing runners.

“Ouch!” I inhaled sharply. Blood stained the potatoes. My thumb throbbed. Fumbling with the paper towels, I rushed to the bathroom and rummaged through the drawers in search of a plaster.

Then, something else. A strange yet instinctual feeling. At first, I could only feel it. Warm, slow and tickly. I ran my hand above my upper thigh. My fingers covered in a warm red liquid. I looked down and it revealed itself just below the seam of my knickers. Scared and unsure, I jumped straight into the shower still wearing my clothes. The warmth of the water distracted me from the feelings below as I tried to clean myself.

Clean. I think? Nana’s pink towel, large and fluffy, helped in a small way. I stepped out into the night air; sat down on the step Nana struggles to use. With the warmth of the lounge behind me and the cool, brisk air of the night in front, I inhaled. Thank God that was over. For some reason the strawberry fields were always special to me, I didn’t mind the bugs, the insects, the rotten strawberries staining my clothes, I enjoyed the sense of homeliness that they created. They were the smells of innocence. A smell drifting further away from me as I grow.

My mum’s necklace was heavy against my chest. Gazing up, the full moon’s familiar glow comforted me. Saw me. Embraced me. A loud squeaking noise echoed in the distance.

I was looking forward to Nana returning home.