

TALIA SIMMONS-SMITH

Caged

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At first, I didn't think much of what my whānau environment was like. There were seven of us living in a three bedroom whare and that was more than enough for us. Nanny made the dining room her bedroom, put a whole bed, lounge suite and telly in there. She said it was because she liked the company of others in her space, I think it was just because she was nosy and wanted to know everyone's business. There was a little room attached to the front door as you walked in. Any normal person would use this room to hang up coats and keep your shoes dry, but my Nan forced Pop to sleep in there. You could only fit a single bed and stereo in there, and yet Pop never complained about that cold damp 'room'. Actually, the whole house was cold and damp, it was one of those old character

homes that was built earlier on in the 1900s. Mā and Pā made the lounge area their headquarters for sleeping, they sacrificed their privacy so I could have a room. Mā would say, “Hei aha taku tamāhine, you don’t need to worry, everything is kei te pai”.

Nan rented out the other two rooms and leveraged off that to cover some rent, then gambled the rest at the pokies. It was a bad habit she picked up along the years after losing much of her home and herself back in Paekakariki.

Phil and Helen were the two flatmates that filled those rooms. Helen was an exchange student from China and kept to herself most of the time, Phil was on the benefit and spent most of the time picking up his grandchildren from school, he would often bring them over home. It was great for me, it meant that I had friends to play with, seeing as I was the only child. We’d always walk down the road and get some fish and chips and eat it with some tomato sauce. Phil went into full on pūkana mode if we squirted out too much sauce, so he would always ration it out, “No, you don’t get two squirts, only bloody one, you think I’m made of money girl”. We lived well together, Helen and Phil stayed with us for so long they became family.

As a child I never believed anything was wrong with my living environment. We weren’t wealthy that’s for damn sure, hell we weren’t even middleclass, but we were damn happy. We mostly lived off mince because it was cheap. Mā would make two-minute-noodles with cabbage and mince, or Shepard’s pie without the fancy ingredients, just potato and mince. Our whānau would always make it work

somehow, we looked after each other. I wore clothes from the second-hand shop and we would constantly go to garage sales for our routine outings. We weren't rich, but we were damn happy.

Nan was such an entertainer, once she started talking you couldn't get her to stop, she had all the tales. She chuckled about how men would fawn over her when she was the ripe age of 17, and whenever we'd protest against this she'd say, "Do you mind, your Nan had men proposing to her left, right a-centre, girl", or she'd share about how she used to be so fit when she was my age, she reckons she'd swim across from Paekakariki to Kapiti Island and back. Pheew, she had all the stories that's for blimmen sure, but my absolute favourite was the one she told of our people, Ngāti Haumia ki Wainui toku iwi. Descendants of the Tainui waka. Stories of her nanny Miriona Mutu Mira and how she stood and fought for the rights of Ngāti Haumia.

Nan said our land back home was called Paekakariki ki Wainui, but the pākeha called it, 'the Wainui block'. "Those blimmen pākeha had their eyes on our land like a hawk in the sky..." she would proclaim while prepping her doughboys for our boil-up, "... They were trying to wait us out, till we forgot about them. As if we'd forget what our tīpuna went through". Nan said that land in Pakakariki ki Wainui had become highly sought after because it was close to the coast, and it's advantage was that it was next to the new public road and close to the wheat mill that was being built in Porirua. Her great Koro Aperahama leased a lot of our land to a pākeha whānau, the Smith family. "They leased that land for many years, and then another pākeha fella came

along and tried to buy our land off of the punk who we was leasing it to, but this pākeha fella was representing the crown...”, Nan always got real passionate about these dealings, I saw the fire and desire in her eyes, “... and so the Smith punks who Koro had leased our land to said that us ‘maaaris’ live elsewhere, and so you know what those sneaky kunekune did, they decided to purchase our land under ‘The Public Works Act’, cheeky fellas alright, trying to cover their tracks by making it legal to steal our land”. Nan said that these sorts of dealings went on for years and it happened all around the motu.

By the time my nana was born in 1942, her nanny Mirona Mutu Mira was protecting our whenua. So by that time, the government had gained 900 acres of Māori owned land around the area of Paekakariki, yet they still wanted our block of land. It was desired to build a recreation reserve for the ‘locals’. The government said they wanted to negotiate with nanny Mirona rather than acquiring it compulsorily under ‘the Public Works Act’, in other words they want to do it the honest way, but if nanny Mirona didn’t comply and sell the land, they’d forcefully take it anyway.

The pākeha were pulling out every trick in the book. In 1946 the Land Court said they negotiated with the solicitor for land owners to sell to the crown and agree that the land was been taken under taken under public works. There was no proof in documentation that the solicitors actually talked to the owners of the land for this deal. Nanny Mirona hadn’t spoken to any solicitor about this being approved, and when brought to her attention she hellishly exclaimed that she wasn’t selling because

her whānau urupa was on this land, she said “I said no my people were all buried there and were born and bred there, I am the last of a big family. My parents, uncles and aunts, cousins all buried there, My grandparents made my parents and the rest of the family promise this land as ‘Whenua Here’ (not to be sold), but can be leased. This small portion of land is worth more to me than 100 acres elsewhere, I value my people who are lying there and I have no desire to exchange at any price!”. Nanny Miriona had plans to provide housing for her tamariki and mokopuna and wasn’t interested for exchanging the land elsewhere.

So come around to 1948, Miriona’s daughter Muriel wants to build a house on their own land, but must consult the public works department. The Māori land court sought contact on her behalf, but the answer they received was that it would be undesirable when the crown still intends to require this land:

Dear Mrs Budge (Nanny Miriona)

This letter is to inform you The Commission of Works acknowledges your appeal to build housing on the Wainui Block. However, it is known the Crown desires to obtain this block of land in the future. The acquisition is not at present urgent and because you object to acquisitions of the land by the Crown, the matter has been left temporary in abeyance. The Crown is in the process of acquiring a-joining sections.

*Signed
Gerald Hader
The Commission of Works*

So it was, the pākeha caged and controlled what we could and couldn't do with our land; the protocols set in place to try to out-smart us, to banish us from our whenua. By 1953, Paekakariki ki Wainui was declared Crown owned land and turned into a recreational park for the public. They renamed the land, Queen Elizabeth Park. The Crown left us a small section for our family urupā, but to this day people still disrespect the space by bring their animals through for walks. "Blimmen punks that crown, thinking they're doing the right thing by giving us a little piece of our land back", Nanny said as she was taste testing the boil-up. Nan was right though, and whenever she told me these stories it stirred up a fire within my belly. Nan always said, "Even though it wasn't the outcome we expected, moko, she stood for what was pono the truth and tiki what was just and right...and you know what moko, that same blood runs through our veins, that same mana motuhake remains within our identity.", I would always be reminded after she recited this story to me over the years.

So when I hear those accusations toward our Māori people, I tremble because I'm reminded of the true horror stories that took place in our country. Who the real 'thugs' were, that we've been forced to live in a cage that told false narratives of us and tried to cover up the real prejudices with the blood of our people. I was struck by this one comment from a student at my secondary school. She said with a smirk and an attitude that I wanted to kick into tomorrow: "I don't think it's right that Māori kids get all the scholarships and white people barely get any, Māori people don't really deserve them". There I

stood, in the middle of a moment that uttered assumptions of me, of my people. It was so subtle but hardly dismissible. It turned my insides and left a heavy weight in my chest. I felt like I couldn't speak, like a puppet controlled by my environment, ruled by what others had been brainwashed to believe, what I had believed, dominated and bound to this cage.

I realised that I had allowed this behaviour to reign dominion over my identity, and perceive my life and my people as the problem, 'undeserving maaari always on the benefit, always violent, never going anywhere in life'. But my Nan said that even though it may look like we fall short, my tīpuna stood for what was pono and tika, and that same blood runs through my veins, that same mana Motuhake is within my identity. And so I swallowed my fears and turned and said to that girl, with a big smile on my face, "Well I have a story for you".