



Kāhuipani

by Anahera Gildea

We'd been down the bush track heaps of times but never as far as the Tuakau bridge. Kui had said it would only take a day, but already Tahu was dawdling.

"Come on," I called back. "We're not there yet."

Far ahead, I imagined the great Waikato River and Kui's spirit waiting for us. Without thinking, I began to walk faster. I didn't realise Tahu's footsteps had stopped until I heard him cry out.

I found him crouched under a *whekī* ponga, arms wrapped round its trunk. The jar of soil was wedged between his knees.

"What are you doing?" I growled. "I thought you were in trouble!"

Tahu's face was pale. "The *kēhua* are following us," he whispered. He was terrified. "I can hear them."

"*Tiakina tō tungāne*," Kui had said to me. I was suddenly ashamed of my impatience and knelt beside my little brother.

"I heard ghosts," Tahu whimpered. "I really heard them. Shhh. Listen."

"Auē, Tahu. There aren't any ghosts."

"But I heard wailing. Like at home."

I knew the sounds he was talking about. "It's not ghosts," I said. "It's people who are sad."

Tahu started crying again. "How long until we get there? It's too far."

I was close to crying myself. "Kui said that if we make it to the river, Te Paea will find us."

Tahu picked up the jar and held it to his chest. Then he lay down. "What if she doesn't want us?" he said quietly.

The sun was high. It was getting hot. We had hours of walking to reach the river, and once we were there, I had no idea how to find a woman I'd only heard people talk about.

"Me haere tāua," I said.

Tahu didn't move. "I'm so tired. Can't we just stay here?"

I shook my head. "I'll carry the jar, eh? Must be heavy." He still didn't budge. "Put it in here then." I unrolled our *whāriki* and held it open. "I'll wrap it in our clothes to keep safe."

Slowly, Tahu sat up. I shook the whāriki once more and, reluctantly, he handed the jar over.

“Come on,” I said. “Farmer Mason’s place is near here.”

We started walking. This time, I held Tahu’s hand. “Will Farmer Mason help us?” he asked.

“Doubt it. He didn’t help when our people were sick.” Tahu looked confused, and I smiled as if a great idea had just dropped into my mind. “But people say he has a strong horse.”

The bush track opened onto a grassy spur. We could see a farmhouse across the paddock, and in the paddock was a huge brown mare.

“I know how to catch a horse,” Tahu said, realising my plan. “I saw Matua do it heaps of times.” He started towards the fence. “You just make a clicking sound.”

“Get back here,” I hissed. “Stay low and keep quiet.”

Tahu sat down, disappointed, and I crept forward. The horse snickered and side-stepped further away. I had my hands on the top rung of the gate, about to climb over, when I heard a biting whistle. I jumped down, getting a splinter in the heel of my hand as punishment.

“Who’s there?” I said, grabbing Tahu and pushing him behind me.

A boy’s voice came from my left. I whipped round to face it.

“You’ll be in big trouble if old Mason catches you pinching his horse.”

The boy was fifteen, maybe sixteen. He walked towards us, laughing, and whistled again, this time with respect. “You’re pretty fearless for a little kōtiro.”

“I’m eleven. And I wasn’t stealing. I was borrowing.”

“I’m Maheru,” the boy said. He sat down in the grass, keeping his distance. “Nō whea kōrua?”

I relaxed my arms a little, and Tahu came out from behind me. “Our kui died,” he said. “There’re just ghosts in our village now.” I nudged him with my foot to keep quiet.

“You tell us where you’re from, first,” I said to Maheru. “Are you following us?”

He laughed. “Kāo, girl. I’m from Mangatāwhiri. I’m sorry to hear about your kuia. The sickness?”

I nodded.

“You sick?” he asked.

“No,” I replied. “You?”

Mahehu shook his head. “Nope. But I have whānau who have left for Te Rēinga as well.”

I nodded. “I’m Kirimahara, and this is my brother, Tahu. We’re heading to the river. We’re going to live with Te Puea.”

Mahehu smiled and stood up. “Good. I was sent to find you – and the others.”

“Others?” I was surprised.

“You’ll see. We’ve got a camp.”

I looked in the direction of the awa. Tahu kicked at the grass and leant into me. “I’m tired, Kiri,” he moaned.

Mahehu strode over. He was skinny but had broad shoulders and looked strong. His woollen pants were oversized, and his greying undershirt had been mended many times – but it was his eyes that I really noticed. They were soft and warm.

“Don’t worry, little man,” he said, reaching down to pick Tahu up. “I’ll be your horse.”

We walked for two hours through the afternoon and another two into evening. Mahehu explained that he had been helping Te Puea find orphans from all the kāinga and pā along the river.

“How many?” I asked.

“Sixty-eight so far, counting you two and me. Most are at Mangatāwhiri already, but there are some at the camp by the bridge with Te Puea. We’ll stay there tonight. Tomorrow we’ll go up river by barge to Mangatāwhiri.”

“Ono tekau mā waru! How will there be enough food?”

Mahehu frowned. My voice was loud, and Tahu was asleep on his shoulder, but I was shocked. “Where will we all sleep?” I asked.

“There’s kai in the river. Te Puea says enough for whoever needs it. She’s going to look after all of us.”

My mouth started watering at the thought of proper food. We’d eaten stale bread and watercress for a week. I hoped Mahehu was right.



We saw the light from the campfires before we got there. It was getting dark, but I could smell food being cooked and could hear people quietly singing. Maheru led us straight to Te Puea. She was organising a bed for some of the smaller children. Tahu was awake now, and she took him from Maheru and kissed his grubby cheek.

“Tēnā koe,” she said to me. “Nau mai, haere mai, child.” She held out her free arm. “I’m Te Puea.”

“Tēnā koe, Whaea.” I could feel tears but held them back. “I’m Kirimahara, and this is my brother, Tahu Manawanui.”

On the ground behind Te Puea were jars and bottles, each one filled with soil. Tahu scrambled out of Te Puea’s arms and fumbled inside our whāriki until he

found the jar that Kui made us bring. He hesitated for a moment before handing it to Te Puea. She pulled the soil to her chest, closed her eyes, and spoke a low karakia. Then she placed the jar beside the others.

“Here we all are,” Te Puea said, turning to include the other orphans.

I followed her gaze. Each jar of soil had been carried by these children from their hau kāinga, and I realised what we were going to do. We would mix the soil, turn it, make the whenua of the new home we would build together. I looked at Te Puea then and, for a moment, it was as if Kui herself was standing there.

“Not a single one will be forgotten,” Te Puea whispered.

Author’s note

Te Puea Hērangi was a great and important Tainui woman and the granddaughter of Tāwhiao, the second Māori king. During the influenza epidemic of 1918, she was living in Mangatāwhiri, in the northern Waikato, where a quarter of the Māori population died. Afterwards, Te Puea found and cared for more than a hundred orphans. She affectionately called them her kāhuipani – her flock of orphans. There are no accounts of jars of soil being brought by the orphans, but Te Puea’s kāhuipani did help build a new community. Together, they cut gorse and flax and drained swamps to re-establish the Māori king’s marae at Ngāruawāhia, on land that had been confiscated after the New Zealand Wars. This marae is known as Tūrangawaewae: “a place to stand”.



Glossary

Auē!	Oh, no!
hau kāinga	homeland/true home
kāinga	home/house
kāo	no
kēhua	ghost
kōtiro	girl
kui	an affectionate term for a grandmother or an older woman
Me haere tāua.	We should go.
Nau mai, haere mai.	Welcome.
Nō whea kōrua?	Where are you two from?
ono tekau mā waru	sixty-eight
pā	village, usually fortified
tēnā koe	hello (to one person)
Tiakina tō tungāne.	Take care of your brother.
whāriki	mat (when travelling, it was rolled up with possessions tucked safely inside)

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Published 2018 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 314 6 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Jodi Wicksteed
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui, Ross Calman, and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 4 JUNE 2018

Curriculum learning areas	English Social Sciences
Reading year level	Year 7
Keywords	change, courage, influenza epidemic, Mangatāwhiri, Māori, New Zealand history, Ngāruawāhia, orphans, siblings, survival, Te Puea Hērangi, te reo Māori, whānau