



Kia Māia

by André Ngāpō

“Look out, Jayson!” Nikora yells. Too late. The ball smashes me in the face.

“Sorry, cuz,” he says. “You’ve gotta keep your eye on the ball.”

“Yeah,” laughs Rena. “Not the ball on your eye!” A few of the others laugh, too, and I walk away. I don’t like this game.

Nikora follows me. We’re supposed to be hanging out while Nan works in the kitchen. “You OK?” he asks.

I nod.

“We told Rena she was mean.”

“Thanks,” I say. My eye is feeling better. I look around, testing it. I see the slow brown river and the big macrocarpa. The hills covered in green bush.

It’s nothing like home.

“Touch is a fun game once you know how to play.”

“I guess so,” I say.

We go see Nan. “Ah, good timing,” she says. “You boys can help with the mahi in the wharekai.”

“Mahi means work,” Nikora says to me. He’s been explaining things all morning. “The wharekai is where we eat.” He shoots me a look, like maybe I don’t like him telling me stuff – or maybe he still feels bad about the ball.

Nan takes me to meet Aunty Tina, who kisses me on the cheek. There’s something familiar about her. “Pay attention to what Aunty says,” Nan tells me. “It’s good practice for tomorrow.” She’s talking about Nanny Eva’s unveiling. It’s all everyone’s talking about, though I’m not sure what an unveiling is.

Aunty Tina has lots of jobs for us. She’s really nice and explains things carefully. I realise she looks like Mum.

We put out plates and cups and cutlery for tea tonight. We fill up the salt and pepper shakers and straighten the bench seats. Out the front window, I can see people being welcomed into the wharenuī. They’re lined up, doing the hongī, just like I did yesterday. Out the back window, some people are digging a hole.

“For the hāngī,” says Nikora. “But don’t worry, you’ll get to try it.” Dad had a hāngī the first time he came to New Zealand to meet Nan.

A few of the nannies and uncles are playing cards in a side room. They’re all laughing away. It sounds like fun. Aunty Tina sees me looking in at them. “They’ve earned a rest,” she says. “It’s our turn to do the mahi now, but you can join them later.”



Someone else is having a rest – I can hear a guitar outside. They’re playing an Ed Sheeran song. I’d love to have a strum right now. I picture Mum’s guitar, sitting in our lounge in Perth. Dad said she often played to me before I was born. Sang too. She recorded her favourite waiata on the iPod. I’ve learnt the words and chords with Dad so we can play together.

We drink iced water with the other workers. Aunty Tina brings us egg sandwiches, putting the plate on a spare table at the back of the hall. I sit down, and suddenly Nikora’s yelling at me. “Jayson! No sitting on tables.”

“What? Why?” I ask, not moving. I’m mad. He can’t yell at me.

“Tikanga,” he says. “You shouldn’t sit where food goes.”

Tikanga. How was I meant to know? I remember Dad saying something about it, but not much. He did say Mum wanted me to learn some karakia. She made recordings of them too, along with the songs. But there was nothing about tikanga.

“Kei te pai, Jayson,” Aunty Tina says. “It’s OK. You’ll know for next time. I’m still learning, too.”

I get off the table, embarrassed. Nikora says sorry, which makes me feel better.



That night, we have a church service in the wharenuī. Nikora and I sit beside Nan. She puts her arm around me and explains that this whole weekend is for Nanny Eva’s family and friends ... to say goodbye. Nanny Eva passed away a year ago. I still wonder why everyone’s calling it an unveiling and why they didn’t say goodbye at the funeral, but the minister starts to speak before I can ask. I’m curious to know what he’s saying. I hear the word whānau. I know that. Family. The minister says Nanny Eva’s name along with some of the

words from the iPod. I’ll ask Nikora what they mean later.

I think about Dad in Papua New Guinea. He’s working there for two months. He says it’s the longest he’ll ever be away. Then my mind drifts to Mum. She would love that I’m at her marae, with her whānau, hearing te reo Māori, learning tikanga.

The minister clears his throat, and everyone starts praying with him.

It’s Mum’s karakia! I join in, bursting with happiness. Nikora smiles in surprise. Nan reaches out to hold my hand.

In the morning, we line up in the wharekai for breakfast: porridge, nice and runny, with sultanas and tinned peaches, just how Dad makes it. I see the girl, Rena, who made the joke about the ball hitting me. “Sorry about yesterday,” she says. “I didn’t mean for everyone to laugh at you. Your face all good now?”

I nod. “All good.”

“Come and sit with us,” she says, leading me over to Nikora and some of the other kids. They ask about Australia and copy my accent. I say they’re the ones with the accent, and they laugh.

We clear the tables and help with the dishes, and soon it’s time to set up the wharekai for the feast. We do the same jobs as yesterday. “Hey, Auntie Tina,” I say, finally working up the courage to ask my question. “What’s an unveiling?”

“Well,” she says, “today everyone will get to see Nanny Eva’s new headstone at the urupā, the cemetery. The stone sits at the top of her grave. It’ll have words about her, and it might have her picture too.”

“OK,” I say.

“It’s called an unveiling because the headstone is covered with a korowai, but the cloak will be taken away.”

Nikora joins in. “There’ll be lots of karakia and waiata. After people leave the urupā, and sprinkle water over themselves to remove the tapu, they’ll come back here for a kai. It’s how we finish a hura kōhatu, all together with food.”

“Ka pai, Nikora,” says Auntie Tina. “You’re an excellent tuakana, though I’m sure your cousin here has a thing or two he could teach you ...” We all smile. Maybe.

Nan comes into the wharekai and walks around, inspecting our mahi. “Great job,” she says. “Time for a break?” Right then I hear the guitar again. I don’t know who’s out there, but they’re really good.

Auntie Tina notices me listening. “You play, Jayson?” she says. I nod.

I’ve been learning since I was seven, though I’m nowhere near as good as the person outside. “I have a guitar at home,” she says. “It needs some new strings, but you can borrow it.”

“Can you play rock?” Nikora asks.

“My favourite,” I say. “I can teach you some chords. I’ll be the ... what is it ... the tuakana? And you can be the other one.”

Nikora laughs. “The teina.”

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The last of the manuhiri have gone. It’s just us left. The light’s beginning to fade, but we don’t care – we’re playing touch. My team’s behind by one try.

Now the ball’s coming my way. “Kia māia, Jayson,” I hear a voice call. It’s Nan. I hold my breath and make

the catch and quickly pass the ball off to Nikora, who’s running straight down the middle of the field.

“Nice pass, Jayson,” he calls as he blasts off.

“Yeah, nice one,” says Rena. She comes over to give me a high-five. I feel so happy.



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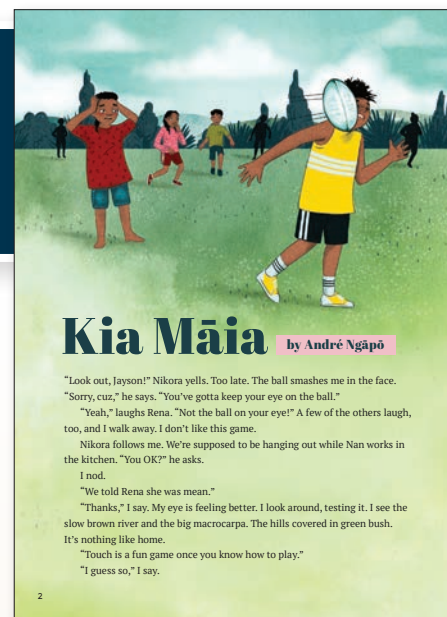
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