

Stranded

by Fraser Smith

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Down at the water, a man was filling buckets. “Are you strong, fella?” he called. “Want to give me a hand? We need to keep the whales wet so their skin doesn’t blister in the sun.”

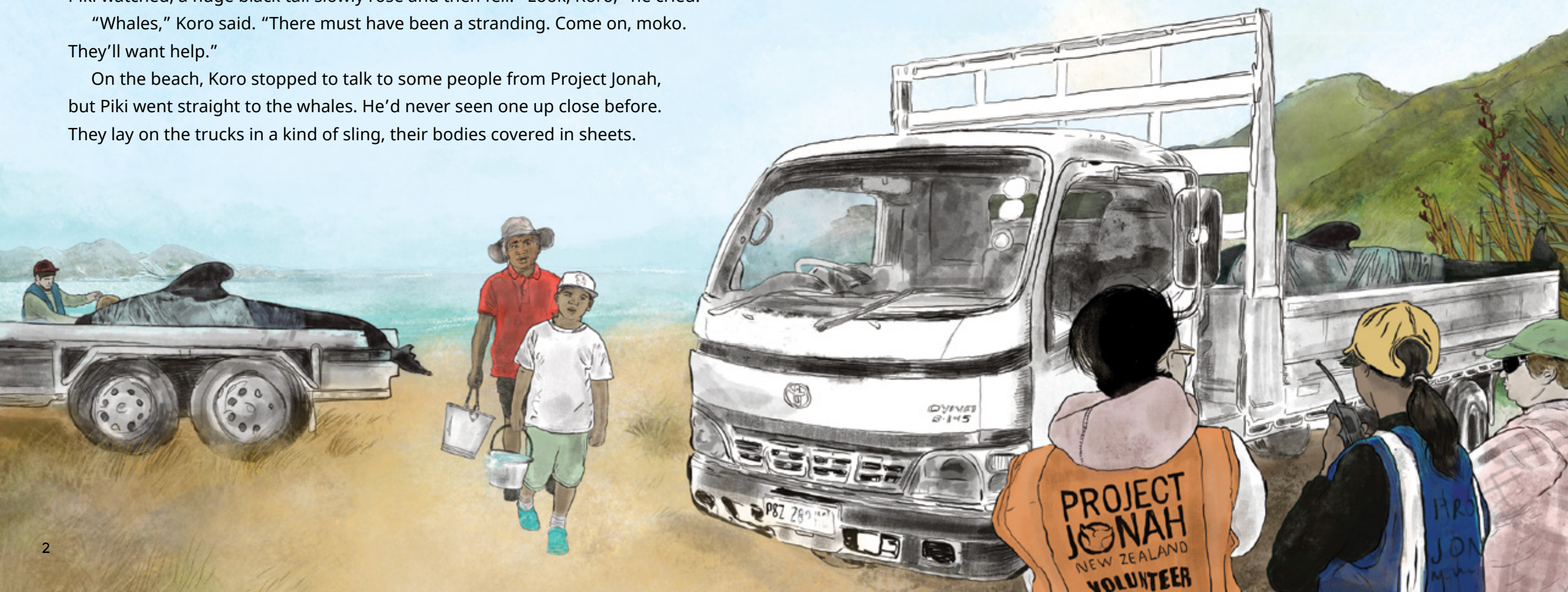
Piki was on his third run when Koro came over. “There’s been a stranding on Te Oneroa-a-Tōhē,” he said. “Somewhere near Ahipara. They reckon there’s about thirty whales.” Koro took one of the buckets. “The sea’s too rough on the west coast, so they’re trucking the survivors here.”

“What kind of whales are they?” Piki asked.

“Upokohue,” said Koro. “Long-finned pilot whales. They get stuck when the tide goes out. I’ve seen it before. One of them strands, and the rest follow. Whales stick together.”

“Like us, eh, Koro?”

“Āe,” said Koro. “Just like us.”





An hour later, there were twenty-two tohorā on the beach – and too many people for Piki to count. He and Koro were looking after one of the last whales to arrive. A digger had lowered it from a truck and into the shallows, and now they worked together in the thigh-deep water. Koro had named their whale Toho.

Renee from Project Jonah told them Toho was a teenage male. She was showing the people on the beach what to do. “The whales are disoriented,” she told Piki. “They’ve been out of the water for a long time.” She placed her hands on Toho’s flanks and began to gently rock him. “To restore his balance,” she explained. “Now you try, but stay clear of the tail. He might get agitated and slap it. You don’t want a whack.”

They had to wait for the tide to turn before they could refloat the pod. Renee said they’d take the matriarch out first. They would use her like a magnet to draw the other whales away from the beach. “They have a better chance of survival if they stay in their family group,” Koro explained after Renee had left.

Piki and Koro stood on either side of Toho – careful of his tail – and slowly rocked him back and forth. His skin felt like a wetsuit, smooth and rubbery.

“Did you know tohorā are ancestors?” Koro said. “The bones in their pectoral fins are like the ones in your hand.”

Piki looked at his grandfather dubiously. He bent to look at Toho’s bottom fin in the water, but nothing about it resembled a hand. Was Koro being serious?

“The finger bones are inside,” said Koro. “And a thumb bone. I guess that means we come from the sea, too?” Koro raised his eyebrows. “What do you say to that?”

“Pretty cool.”

“It gets wild out there. What if you had to go back?”

“I could handle it,” said Piki.

“Tough guy,” Koro teased.

Piki nodded. “I am tough,” he said.

But if Piki was honest, he was getting cold. Was Koro? It was hard to tell, and Piki didn't want to complain.

"Keep rocking," Renee called over her loud hailer. "Ten more minutes."

Toho slapped his tail. "Kia tau, taku whanaunga," Koro said. "You need to be calm. Not quite yet."

Piki watched as Koro placed a hand on the whale's head. He had a memory of Koro doing the same to him. It was something he did a lot, especially when Piki first went to live with him and Nan. That was three years ago, when Dad went away. He would be out next week. Home in time for summer - no longer stranded like the whales.

Koro began to whistle. Piki knew the tune and sang along.

Whitiwhitia e te rā

Mahea ake ngā pōraruraru

Makere ana ngā here.

Toho seemed to relax. He even blinked like he was saying hello. "I think he knows this one, Koro," Piki said.

Now the volunteers were moving. The matriarch lay waiting on her pontoon. They'd watched as she was towed out into the bay.

"I think she's calling," Koro said. "I can feel Toho shiver." He pointed at the water. "Take a listen," he said to Piki.

Koro was right. The sea was ringing with sounds: high-pitched whistles, low grunts, clicks and calls. His grandfather smiled when Piki came up for breath.

"Āe?" he said. Piki nodded. "Those high-pitched sounds are direction finders. Whales use them to find their way."

Piki wanted to shiver, too. The whales' calls were one of the loneliest sounds he'd ever heard.





Then it was time. They watched the matriarch swim free of the pontoon. Renee called to them from the beach. “On the count of three ...”

Piki and Koro eased Toho into deeper water. Around them, other volunteers were doing the same with their whales. They were all hoping for one thing. Koro stepped forward and began to speak. “Haere rā e te tupu tohorā. Haere ki a Tangaroa me tō whānau. Haere, haere, haere.”

Suddenly Piki didn’t want to look. He dived under, letting himself drift on the sandy bottom so he could listen to the whales. There were more calls. The matriarch didn’t sound nearly as lonely. He opened his eyes and saw a rush of water as Toho surged away.

Piki was filled with relief. If Toho hadn’t swum, the young whale might have called the others back. They’d have become stranded all over again. He stood beside Koro, and they watched as the whales grouped and circled. Slowly, one at a time, they spouted, sounded, and disappeared.

Back at the car, Koro found towels. They dried off and changed their clothes. “You were awesome out there,” Koro said. “I could see you were getting cold. You’re a natural in the water – like your dad.”

“He never rescued a whale, though. Eh, Koro?”

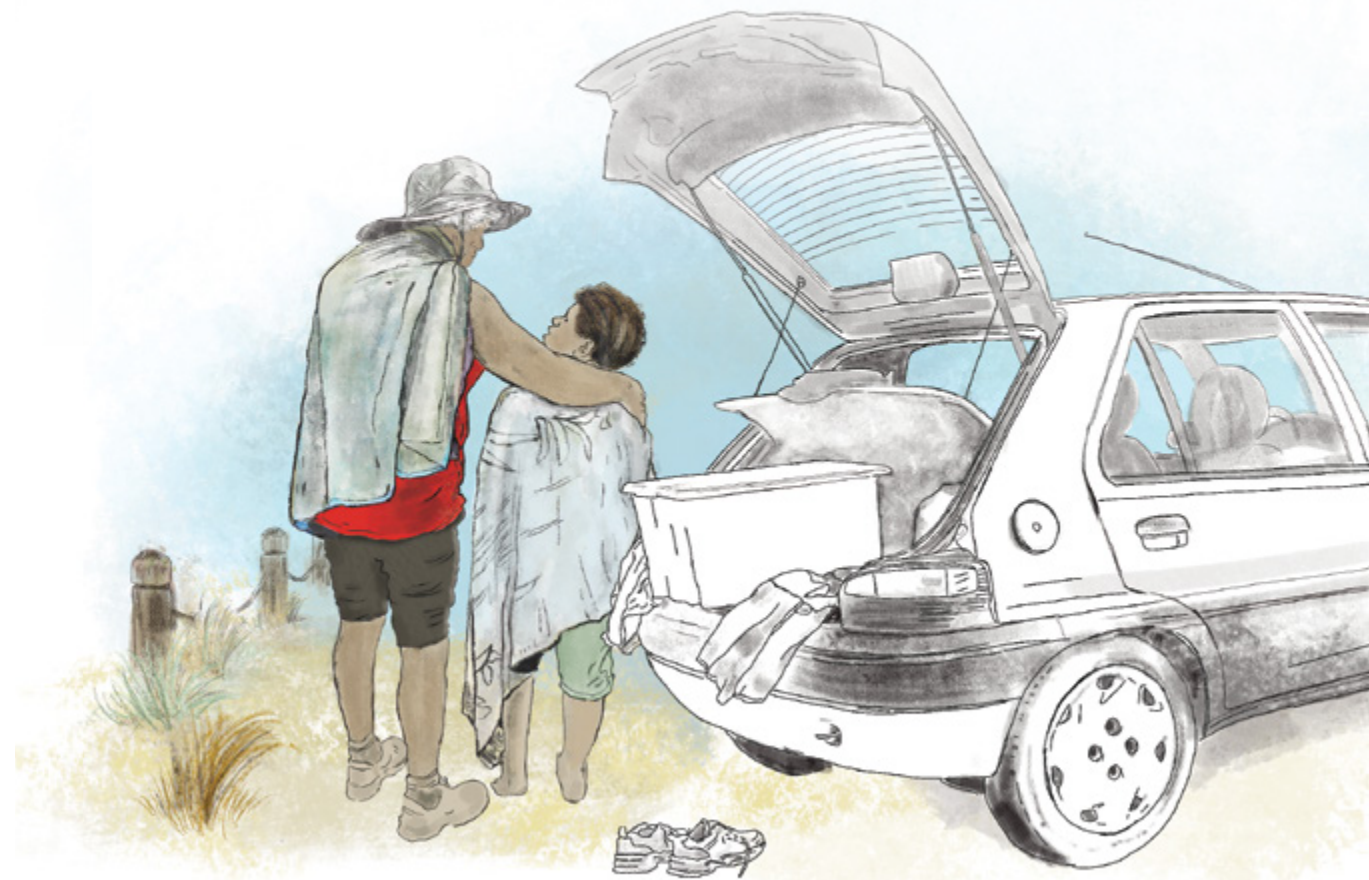
“Kāo. He’ll be proud when you tell him about today.”

Piki imagined sitting at Koro and Nan’s kitchen table, telling Dad about the stranding. His father would nod and ask questions, and Piki would explain about the matriarch and the rocking.

They were all going to live together for a bit. Piki and his dad and Nan and Koro, just until Dad found his feet. Then they’d look for a place of their own. Nan said it would be somewhere close by so she could keep her eye on them.

“Toho and his whānau should be well on their way,” said Koro.

Piki nodded. He thought so, too.



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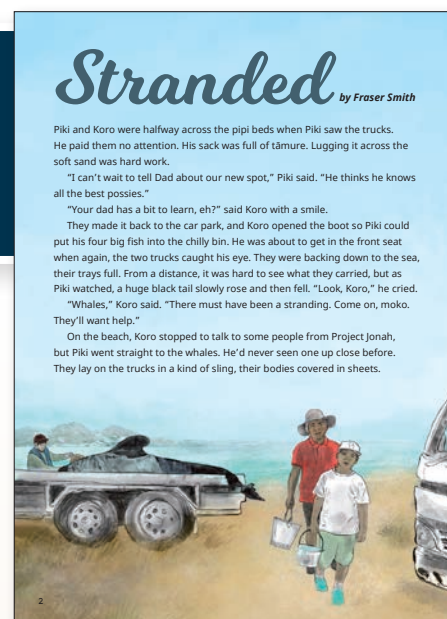
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