

Kahukura

I force myself out of bed, flatten every noticeable wrinkle on my bed sheets flat, before brushing my teeth. I catch my reflection in every hurried movement, hair neat, shirt tucked in, forcing the corners of my mouth up into a bright smile. Practicing for my first day of school. As I head out the door my eyes flick to the crooked family photo on the wall. For a second I freeze, then I close the door behind me, thoughts of my first day and my appearance juggling inside my puku.

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I can quite literally feel their eyes burning into me as they all sing the waiata. My feet burn with every step of the haruru. Their sweaty palms meet with mine as they kiss me on the cheek. How disturbing.

“Nau mai, Kahukura,” one of the teachers say to me. Before I can answer, a broad-shouldered girl with scruffy ginger brown curls grabs my arm and introduces herself,

“Kia ora, I’m Rennie.”

She doesn’t wait for my answer before weaving us through the school. Students stream past us, and my stomach twists. Don’t look up. Don’t look up.

Rennie’s words tumble over each other like she’s rapping, and like we’ve known each other for ages.

“... and that’s the whare kai, don’t line up late or you’re gonna miss out on the best kai.”

I nod.

She glances at my clean, crisp shirt, then up at my eyes. Her gaze lingers on my face for a second too long.

“Don’t worry Kahukura, you don’t have to be so tense. I can tell you’ve got stories. But you can relax, I won’t tell anyone your secrets. See that chick over there? That’s Atarangi. Now that’s someone you shouldn’t trust, she’s a total snake.”

She takes a breath before snapping her direction towards a tall boy in a too small school uniform.

“Oi Lucas! Did you hear about Raukura’s piupiu dropping?!”

“Yeah, that was ratchet. But she did good though, considering.”

“Yeah, still pretty funny.” Rennie jokes as we enter the wharekai.

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That weekend, Rennie came to my house. I go to grab a tea towel, before Rennie bumps her shoulder against mine, hinting she wants me to wash. My hands plunge into the soapy foam, as she leans in close under the hiss of the hot water tap. She dries a cup, and without looking at me, speaks,

“I didn’t get to ask you, but why did you move schools?”

Heat rushes to my face. Soap slips through my fingers as I scrub the same plate over and over. “Umm, my mum and dad had a fight about me and went their own ways...It’s just me and my dad now.” “Why, what happened? Don’t worry girly, you can trust me.”

They didn’t fight because of me. They fought because of him.

“Well...”

Tupac’s voice echoes from the lounge, the walls soaking up the essence of gunja loitering its way to the kitchen. One sniff makes me gag.

“Let’s go to the park.” I say, both to get Rennie out of the house and off my case.

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As soon as I step foot into the classroom on Monday, I glance around to see everyone’s eyes digging into me. *Why are they all staring at me?*

A couple of girls are huddled in the corner, little whispers slipping out their mouths.

Are they talking about me?

I sit at my seat and the desk to my left is empty. No Rennie.

"Ew, get out of my seat."

I look up to see the boy Lucas looking menacingly at me.

I walk to the front, all flustered from embarrassment, dragging my feet across the ground. I can hear the muffled laughter and feel the burning stares. Then, through all the clamour, only one word cuts through the noise,

"fafa."

My head snaps towards the direction of the sound. I see Rennie looking at me like a stranger before I burst out of there as fast as I can.

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Later, I lay underneath a willow tree. It's just me and my thoughts. Every whisper, every pair of eyes is engraved in my mind, Rennie's voice hissing those words, overlaying the memories of my last school. And of my mum...

Crying in my dad's arms, my lips began to tremble, making words hard to come out.

"Y'know bubba.."

His voice was gentle. He lifted his chin lightly, placing it on my head.

"In my heart you're my son. But if you're also my daughter... If that's what makes you feel at home in your own skin... then you're my daughter too."

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A few months later, I stand outside my new school. After brushing down my skirt and checking my carefully applied make up one more time, I walk towards the office.

I hope this time I am ready for the challenges to come.