

Poi

by Tira Johnson

I didn't like my poi. It was lopsided. The taura was loose, and one of the hukahuka had fallen off. When I found a little hole in the plastic, I stuck my finger in and wiggled it. Some foam came out – and then a bit more. I plucked and pulled until there was a pile of crumbled foam at my feet. Then I noticed – everyone was quiet and looking at me. Mrs Waru stepped through the rows, frowning.

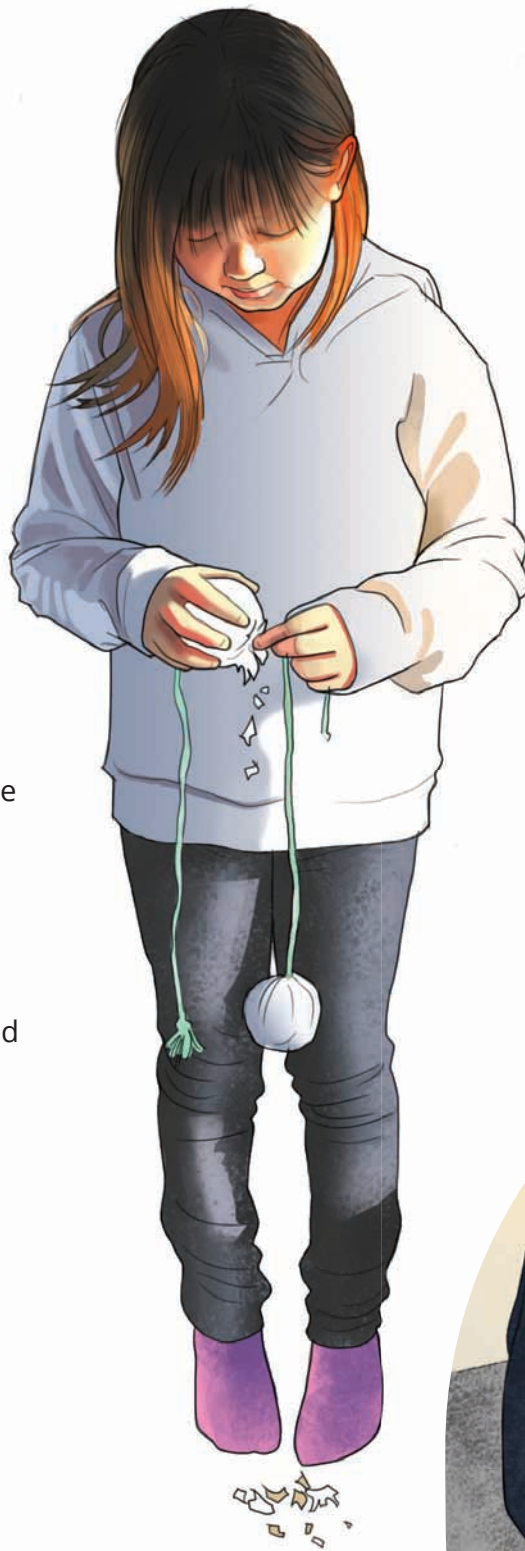
“Maia, the kapa haka festival is in two weeks. What are you doing?”

“My poi had a hole in it.” I held it up, and more foam fell out. “I’m trying to fix it.”

“No, Maia, you’ve ruined it.”

“Whatever.” As soon as the word left my mouth, I wished I hadn’t said it.

Mrs Waru looked stern. “Maia, if you don’t want to be here, you can sit outside Mr Hayward’s office. Haere atu! Go now!”



“You need to make good choices,” Mr Hayward said.

“Misbehaving in kapa haka isn’t a good choice, is it?”

“I’m sorry, Mr Hayward.”

“Don’t you want to practise with your friends? They’re all working really hard.”

“Yes, but kapa haka is boring. I can’t sing, and I forget the words.”

Mr Hayward shook his head. “I’m sure that’s not true. But if it is boring, why did you join?”

“All my friends are in kapa haka – and my cousins,” I told him. “I want to go to the festival with them.”

“It’s not fair to the others if you’re not trying your best,” Mr Hayward said. He held up my ruined poi. “Miss Taiapa is making new poi for the festival. I would like you to help her every lunchtime instead of kapa haka practice, OK?”

“OK.”



Miss Taiapa frowned. "We'll need sixty-five poi."

"Sixty-five? That's heaps!" I cried.

"There are ten girls in each row and three rows."

"That's thirty," I reminded her.

"And they need two poi each, so that's ..."

I sighed. "Sixty."

"And we'll make five spares just in case some get lost."

"That's going to take forever," I complained.

"Then I'm lucky I've got you to help me," said Miss Taiapa.

"See you tomorrow at lunchtime."

I really didn't mind helping Miss Taiapa. She's in Te Whakatoi, the Art Room, and it's the best room in the school. It's full of cool stuff: crayons, pastels, paint, coloured paper, glitter, feathers, googly eyes – everything.

There on the table, ready for poi making, was a box of black wool.

"Miss, do we have to use black wool for our poi?" I asked.

"Black is so boring. Our school colours are blue and red."

"You're so right." Miss Taiapa dug into a cupboard and pulled out more wool. We started untangling it.

"Maia, do you know how to do a four-plait for the taura?"

"Sure, one of my cousins showed me. Hey, why don't we do blue and red covers for the poi as well? The front row could have blue poi, the next row red, and the third blue. It would look awesome."

"Maia, that's a brilliant idea. It really is," Miss Taiapa said. "But I don't have blue and red plastic. We'll have to stick with what we've got – white."

We started on the four-plait. I took strands of red, and Miss Taiapa took strands of blue. We tied them together with a knot. Miss Taiapa shut the knot in the top drawer of her desk and pulled tight. Then I crossed red over red, and Miss Taiapa crossed blue over blue – again and again and again. We finished the plait with another knot, leaving a length of loose wool at the end.

"Tino pai," said Miss Taiapa. "Only sixty-four more to go."



Lunchtimes with Miss Taiapa went faster than I'd thought. We had just about finished the taura and hukahuka when I had another idea. "What about grocery bags?"

"He aha?" said Miss Taiapa.

"Grocery bags – the ones at the supermarket. They're different colours. We could ask everyone to bring in red and blue supermarket bags. Then we can make poi covers out of those."

Miss Taiapa didn't waste any time. When the bell rang that afternoon, everyone in school had a notice to take home. By lunchtime the next day, we had plenty of blue and red grocery bags.



I cut circles of foam and scrunched them into balls. "They can't be too tight," I said, "or they hurt your hand."

"Not too loose either," said Miss Taiapa, "or they fly around everywhere."

I held the foam ball while Miss Taiapa tied it to the end of a plaited taura. She stretched a blue grocery bag over the foam and pulled tight. I wound sticky tape around and around the base. Miss Taiapa let me trim the extra plastic with her sharpest scissors.

There it was. The best-looking poi I'd ever seen. I spun it up over my shoulder, down off my leg, and caught it back in front of me. Perfect.

"You're very good with that poi. Maybe you should've stayed in kapa haka."

"No, I don't think so," I said. "I like doing this better."

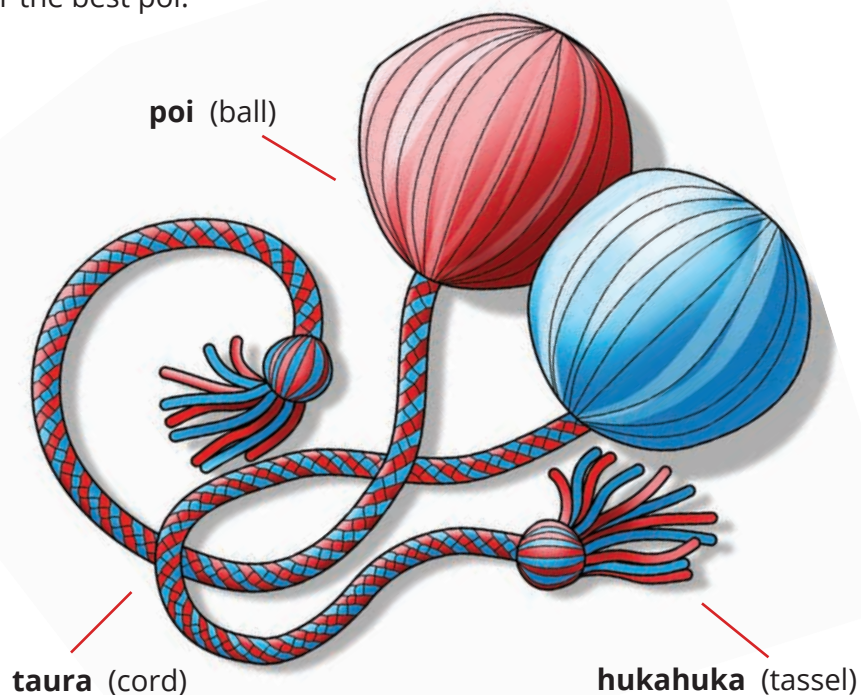
We handed out the new poi the day before the festival. The colours shone. When the girls spun the blue ones, they looked like waves. And when they spun the red ones, they looked like fire.

Mrs Waru held the spare poi. "Maia, these are beautiful, really beautiful. Maybe it was a good thing I sent you out of kapa haka."

"I'm sorry, Miss. I didn't mean to be a hōhā."

"Thank you, Maia. I think you should come to the festival with us tomorrow after all. Ask Mum or Dad to fill in your form. We need you there – Maia the kaitiaki of our beautiful poi!"

So, I went to the festival. I didn't have to sing. I didn't have to perform. I did have to go on stage though, but only once. That was when Mrs Waru asked me to accept our group's prize for the best poi.



illustrations by Martin Simpson

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