

Whānau

by Whiti Hereaka



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Timi reaches down to feel the sheet. Dry. The first time he mimied the bed, he’d tried to hide it from Nan, stuffing the sheets into the washing machine by himself. He’d used too much soap powder and flooded the wash house with bubbles. But Nan wasn’t mad. She’d hugged him and said it was OK. “We’ll clean up together,” she said. It was still embarrassing when he wet the bed, but Nan never made him feel bad. She said it would just take a bit of time.

Timi tries to go back to sleep, except he’s worried. What if he has the dream again? Besides, he’s thirsty. He decides to get up.

When Timi first came to live with Nan, he crashed into things in the night. Now Nan leaves the hall light on. Her place is starting to feel like home. He likes being on the farm, helping. He collects the eggs and feeds the chooks and weeds the tomatoes – all the jobs Joe did before he went to boarding school. Timi misses Māmā, but the funny thing is if he went back to live with her, he’d miss Nan – and Joe, even though he’s a tease. Can you be homesick for two places at once? Timi wonders.



He's almost reached the kitchen when he hears a noise coming from Koro's armchair. Nan is there, wrapped in Koro's special blanket.

"E tama. What are you doing up?"

"I can't sleep." The floorboards are cold. Timi's feet are cold. He wishes they were tucked under Koro's blanket.

"Sit here," Nan says, pointing to the chair. "I'll warm you some miraka."



Nan wraps the blanket round Timi. It smells like Koro. Timi remembers sitting on his lap when he was little, listening to stories and looking at the hairs in Koro's nose. When Timi was older, they'd played cricket and gone fishing. There was none of that now.

"I miss him, too," Nan says as she goes to the kitchen. She can always tell what's on Timi's mind.

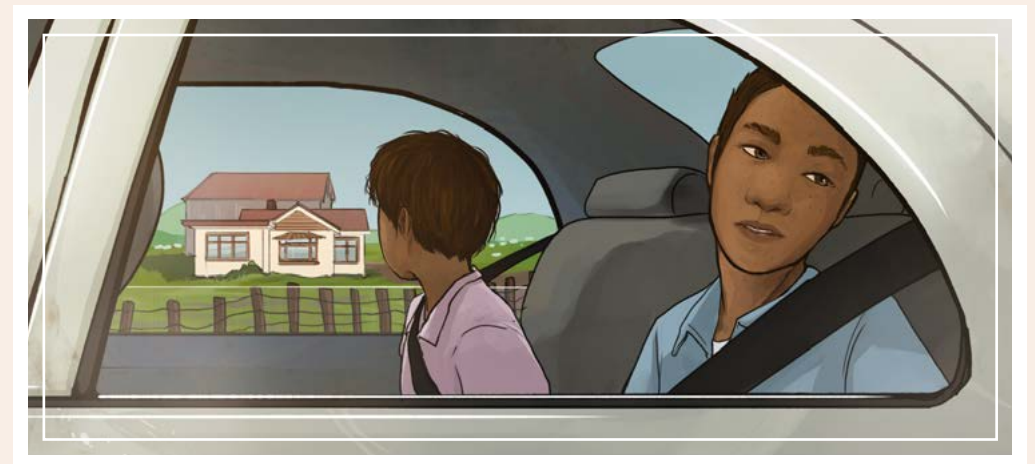
It's dark in the sitting room. And cosy. He feels sleepy.

The sun's well up when Timi wakes. For a moment, he wonders if seeing Nan last night was another dream. Then he sees Koro's blanket. Nan must have carried him back to bed. Or maybe Joe. He'll tease Timi about it. Joe's almost thirteen, not that much older than Timi, but he thinks he's a big deal. He's been at boarding school a term. He likes that Timi has to go to the local school with all the little kids – the same one he went to.

Timi gets dressed and goes to the kitchen for breakfast. Nan's stirring porridge. "Mōrena, Timi. Set the table. Joe will be in soon. We're going out after breakfast," she adds. "You'll need to spruce yourself up."

They hardly go anywhere. Timi eats quickly, wondering where they're going. Maybe into town to see a movie? Or bowling? Not the kind Koro used to play but ten-pin bowling, with the special shoes and hot chips with tomato sauce after.

"Slow down," scolds Nan. "You'll get a sore puku."



They don't go far – just the Toole's place. A sheep farm. Joe rolls his eyes at Timi. They got dressed up just to see one of Nan's friends and her hipi?

"Kia ora, tātau," Mrs Toole says.

"Kia ora, Alice," Nan says, kissing Mrs Toole on the cheek.

"Kuhu mai. They're out this way ..."



Timi has no idea what Mrs Toole's talking about, but they follow her outside to a shed. In the corner, there's a box, and inside the box is a dog with floppy ears, surrounded by her babies. Timi's never seen puppies before. They squirm about making funny noises. It's hard to tell if they're upset or playing.

"I'm so grateful you can take one, Tilly," Mrs Toole says. "There are far too many for me to keep."

"Go on." Nan nudges Timi towards the box. "Pick one."

Timi doesn't like dogs. Not really. They're too loud and jumpy. He does his best to keep away from Nan's three farm dogs – Tahī, Rua, and Toru – but they're always following him round.

Timi picks out the smallest, quietest pup. It's mostly black with a bit of white on its face, and it has a pink nose and brown eyes. Talking softly, he gently picks the puppy up.

Mrs Toole looks doubtful. "Are you sure about that one, love?" she asks. "He's the runt."

Timi nods and holds the little dog closer.

Joe rubs the dog's ears. "What are you going to call him?"

Timi doesn't know.

They set up a bed in the wash house. Nan finds a basket. Then she puts a blanket in the basket and tucks a hottie and an alarm clock under the blanket. Timi understands the hottie – but the clock?

"It feels like a heartbeat," Nan explains. "It means the puppy won't miss its mother."

"Poor little guy," Timi says. He wishes a clock would help him.

"It'll be OK," Nan says, scratching the little dog behind the ear. "He'll settle. There's plenty of love in this house." Nan's eyes are sad, but she's smiling at Timi. She takes his hand and gives it a little squeeze, then kisses him on the forehead. Timi squeezes Nan's hand back.

Timi wakes in the middle of the night. It's the puppy – he's whining. He slips out of bed, quietly, so he doesn't wake Joe, and puts on his warm socks and slippers.

When he opens the wash house door, Timi smells it – the puppy has wet his bed. "It's all right, boy," Timi says, lifting the basket outside. "I'll take care of you."

Timi goes inside and grabs the special blanket from Koro's chair. He can hear the puppy, still crying. Back in the wash house, he sits on the floor and leans against the wall.

He picks up the dog and tucks him close to his chest. "I'm not the same as your māmā, I know. It's all right to miss her. But we can be your whānau, too." The puppy sighs and yawns and snuggles closer. "Having more people to love you is a good thing," Timi adds. "Now you've got me and Nan and Joe."

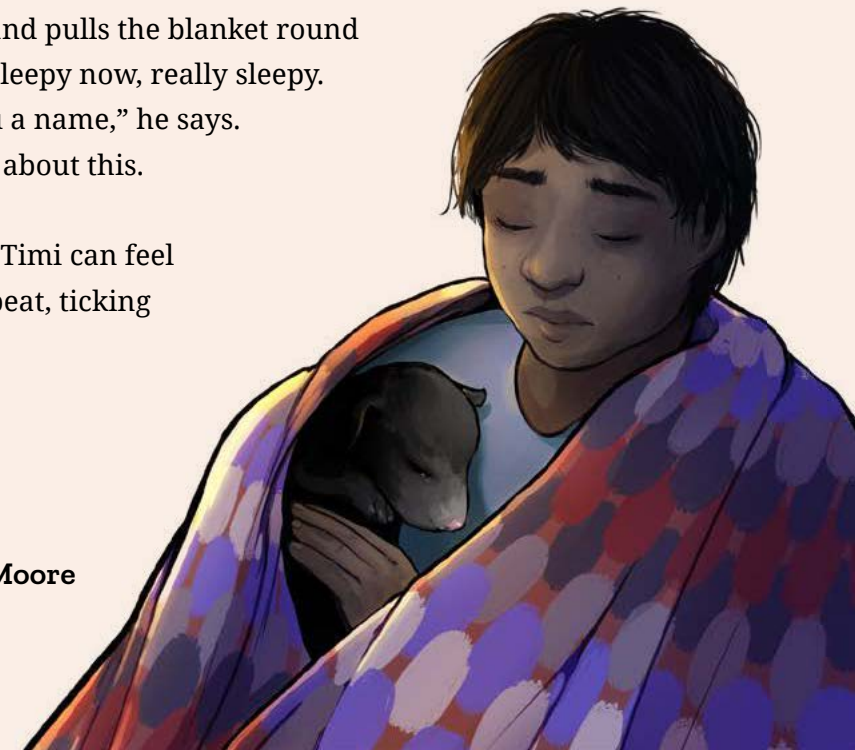
Timi yawns, too, and pulls the blanket round them both. He feels sleepy now, really sleepy.

"We need to give you a name," he says.

Timi's been thinking about this.

"What about Whā?"

But Whā's asleep. Timi can feel the little dog's heartbeat, ticking like a clock.



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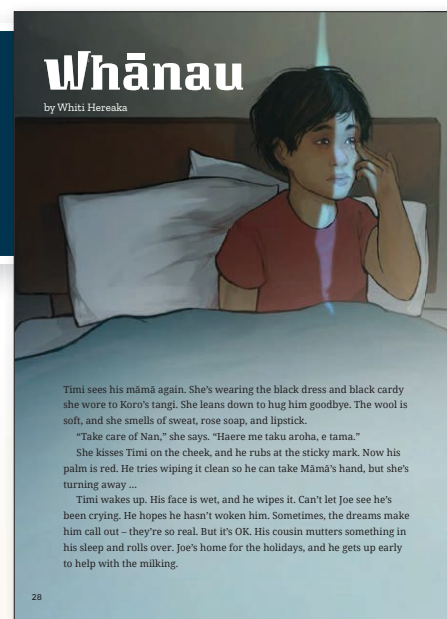
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