



'Willow Trees and Waterholes'

By Sawooly Li, Senior Winner aged 17 from New Zealand

When he leaves, there is silence. It slips off his coat hooks, settles with the dust on his clothes, caresses my cheek in the still, sunstruck mornings. Sometimes I sit beneath the willow tree, as we had before his first departure, weaving harakeke¹ into mats of checkered green. Lush hues illuminate golden rays of sun, which slip through the willow leaves like sand in an hourglass. Time passes. I wait for him to return.

I was young, then. Memories, now faded at the edges, glow like glistening waterholes in the summer heat, melt like pavlova on tongue. But his tanned skin, smiling eyes and large, calloused hands—teaching me how to swim, tucking me into bed—are still imprinted vividly in my mind. I remember the way he smells, like pine and woodsmoke in the winters, how he feels like kauri², big and sturdy and strong: memories I have clung onto tightly throughout the years.

The months before his first leave are an oblivious blur; only looking back did I realise the significance of those hushed phone calls, the rubble and chaos on the television, the thin line my father's lips became as he watched the children crying and towns exploding in bits of dust and breaking headlines.

Later that month, I was watching him weave, fingers flying over flax-like blades. Willow leaves dipped into water, a canopy ringing with bird calls of the tui and the silvereyes.

He said, "I'm going to be gone for just a while."

The evening was cold.

"Where are you going, Papa?" I asked.

His expression was bittersweet, like burnt honeycomb. He said there were people who needed help. Vulnerable, innocent people, who deserved to have sweet summer memories, and to know their papas, just as I did. People who deserved to cherish their children lovingly, just as he did.

I thought of the television's chorus of aeroplane engines and the rumble of collapsing buildings.

In the gentle evening, the birds sang in the trees. He said, "I'll be back before you know it,"

I said, "Okay, Papa."

While he was gone, people told me he was a hero, fighting on the frontlines for all those unable to fight for themselves. That made me proud. But the months passed, and the

¹ New Zealand flax. Represents family in Māori thought.

² A native New Zealand tree. One of the largest in the world.

seasons changed. The winter was colder without him. Summer lost its hues. Letters stacked up in my drawer.

His returns were short, mere months of bliss. Each time, his face seemed more lined, more careworn. His hands were rougher, calluses harder, and he smelled like new uniform and unfamiliar washing powder.

Each time he left, I felt a little more bitter. In the mirror, I watched myself grow taller against the doorframe. There were days I was proud of him, days I was worried sick, and days I was utterly angry at him for leaving me. Other kids beamed on stage at assemblies, but I knew his face was absent. When we won our swim meets, the celebration was still tinged with blue. Often, I sat under the willow tree, weaving harakeke, but the birdsong seemed more melancholy than sweet.

You've changed," my father told me.

I handed him firewood. He loaded it into the grate.

I said, "I've grown, Papa."

He looked at me. His eyes were more lined, more creased.

"I've missed you, papa." I told him. "But you've missed a lot, too."

We were silent for a moment.

He asked me if I was angry at him. I told him that I wasn't.

We were silent for another moment still.

"Do you know why I go back?" He asked me gently, turning away from the fireplace. His shoulders were broad, still, like kauri. I saw soot on his fingertips. "Do you know why I go back, when I miss you so, so, dearly?"

Outside, the wind blew gently. I heard the moreporks hoot.

"Mana," My father said. "A person's life force, embodied in every living creature; what fuels the spirit and soul. It is identity, pride, respect for other people and the environment around you."

His eyes shone. "When you honour that, there is manaakitanga: the understanding that others are just as important as yourself, if not more."

At that moment, he was bright. He exuded life, passion, soul. "Not everyone has the power to help. But I do. And I see the innocent driven from their homes, unjustly slaughtered, buried in rubble, separated from family, when they are each just as important as I."

His face was anguished in the low, flickering light. "Can I neglect my responsibility to help them? Can I neglect my morals? It would be a disgrace to my mana. It is my duty."

I watched as he lit the fire, nursing the flame.

"And my mana passes onto you," he said. "You inherit it."

There was the familiar smell of woodsmoke. I breathed it in deeply. My father smiled softly. "I want to make you proud."

The years passed quickly, leaving my childhood behind in a rush, like mist on a Monday morning. Willow trees and waterholes were that of the past; the present was the suburban rush of cars and flashing buses, stethoscopes and white coats—textbooks and hospital corridors became quickly accustomed friends.

Life was normal, in the beginning. A different rhythm, but a steady beat.

Then, the war came.

Slowly. It trickled stealthily into the nooks of homes, mingled with the air, hid behind shadows of tall concrete buildings, and the noise of honking traffic and hurrying pedestrians.

As it crept into our country, we saw the aftermath of the war in others; ongoing battles, losing battles, lost battles.

The world had not yet seen a victory. Morale was low. Cries of children and anguished families pierced the air, and it was not the drone of aeroplanes, but instead, that of blaring ambulance sirens which followed—a chaos of injured streamed in, but no shrapnel nor bullets were the source; it was, instead, the winding tentacles of Covid-19, wrapped around lungs, squeezing throats, sinuses, hearts.

Soon, zero became one, which turned into ten, then into a hundred, then a thousand. We were swarmed, ambushed by the enemy, surrounded by bodies and battlefields, bodies turned into battlefields, and we tried desperately to win.

Facemasks rubbed ears raw, and the air smelled sour and thick with the fume of alcoholic sanitizers. Waiting rooms flooded with the sick: children clung onto parents, parents clung onto their children. I remember a haze of overshifts and night shifts, rattles of trolleys, the quiet beeping of machines, praying they wouldn't fall silent.

We washed our hands three times, four, five. We peeled coveralls off our bodies, masks and goggles slick with sweat, each night more exhausted than the last. On bus rides home, away from the battleground of sick bodies and churning machines, the roads were eerily empty. Silent like ghost towns. Glow from streetlights cascaded like waterfalls, touching me softly in the early morning twilight.

It became routine, sanitising, stripping down, washing every curve and corner of my body, praying that one line did not become two. Each morning I rose and prepared my defences, rallied my nerves and energy for another fight.

The end seemed near. Ceasefire arrived. People stepped out slowly like hedgehogs from hibernation, cases died down and life returned to lonely cities and empty streets. In the lull of normalcy, we thought we had won.

But Covid struck again with renewed vengeance. Tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands. And we were called back to war, as fervently as we had been the time before.

It felt hopeless. I was exhausted. Our backs were against the wall, our heels were slipping off the edge.

But I could not turn my back.

And it was then, that I finally, truly, understood what my father had told me all those years ago. It was mana: my soul, my identity, my pride, my values. I could not step aside when there were so many in need. It was responsibility, duty. It was manaakitanga, the ability to put others, and the community, above myself.

When I looked around, there were so many selfless people; bus drivers, grocery workers, doctors, volunteers, who battled on the frontlines. I could see manaakitanga in everyday citizens, as they put the collective good above their own jobs, desires, freedom. It filled me with pride, strength, and love for my community.

Covid would return, with its slippery limbs and many variants. But we, the people of New Zealand, of beautiful Aoeteroa, would be here to fight on.

I walk down the old gravel driveway. The willow tree sways, unchanged with age, still golden with green youth in the sunstruck evening. Under its leaves, there is a figure, weaving harakeke, tanned and tall, shoulders beginning to hunch with age.

I want to make him proud. I want to be deserving of the mana he leaves behind to me. In the distance, the tui calls.

The fight has been tough. The fight is still going.

But all is well.