

The Red Trees

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I remember that day. Dark grey clouds rolled over the hills, shutting out the rays of light. It gave the surroundings a gloomy feel. The recent rain covered the rich green grass with a glistening sheen. We had parked the truck on the other side of the rusty bridge, next to the empty playground. Our whanau had gathered on the shimmering black sand. It wasn't a long ride from the marae to the beach, but it felt good to reach my arms to the sky and stretch my tired muscles. It felt as if I hadn't seen my family in months. There were new young faces that I had never seen before and old wrinkled faces that I would probably never see again after this day. The other young kids linked arms with the elderly as they helped them up to the top of the hill.

In the distance, I could see my dad, clutching the beautiful Pohutukawa tree. Sand flicked at my heels as I slid down the sand dune to lend a hand. When we finally made it to the top, everyone stood still and quiet. All that we heard was the powerful waves throwing themselves at the rocky cliffs and the cries of lonesome seagulls in the sky. One of the Kuia guided my father over to the pre-dug hole. I casually made my way over to my mum. My heels sunk into the cool dense sand. The cries seemed to become louder as the tree slid into the sand. The struggle I had been facing with tears was now lost and I surrendered to the salty water that clouded my vision and stung my eyes. Suddenly, a warm gloved hand squeezed my shoulder. It was the funeral director. He lent me a comforting smile which made me feel more at ease.

As the base of the blossoming tree was being covered, my whanau began to sing our waiata. The hymn traveled down the coast. Even the restless waves seemed to die down in respect. I stared over at my Koro. His wise hazel eyes glistened. It was hard to know what my Koro was thinking as his wrinkled face showed no emotion. Once the tree was planted and the waiata had finished, the grown-ups made their way back to their old vehicles. I took the rest of us kids down to the stream. The long winding brook that started from the base of the Taranaki mountain and ended just off the west coast. Our hands grew numb as we searched the pristine water for little crabs. After winning the stone-throwing competitions, I

wandered away from the crowds of children. The waves lapped up against the grainy seashore. My attention was focused on the calming sound of the waves as they moved up and down the coast.

As I glanced to my right, I could see the cliffs stretch down the beach. Mist clung tightly to the tops of the rock walls. The mist lay so low that it seemed like it could pour into the ocean at any minute. I looked to my left. A large wall of rocks and sand blocked my view of the other side of the beach. The flat-sided rock stood high. It was a perfect home for tiny seabirds who were desperate to escape the harsh winter winds. The breathtaking environment around me made me appear tiny. Although I was mesmerised by the scenic views, I noticed that behind the puffs of clouds, the meager rays of daylight began to dim. Tiny twinkling dots started to burst through and blanket the night sky. It was magical. The lonely moon, placed just above the horizon, shimmered across the cold sea. I could hear my mother's voice call for me from the hill. It was time to leave. I wandered casually back down the beach, allowing the fresh sea breeze to go through my body. Suddenly, a bright and shiny white shell caught my attention. I reached down to have a look. I rubbed my thumb across the face of the shell. The tides had washed away every rough surface. I stored it in my jacket pocket and strolled back to the car.

At the time, I wasn't sure whether I would return or not; but I will always remember that day. It seemed so long ago. The cliffs look different now. Chunks of rock chipped away by the roaring sea. Newly developed boulders scatter across the flat sand, giving the coast an untidy look. We decided that we would only travel back in the hot summers. With the changing climate, we found it too hard to bear the cold and snow that the great Mountain produced. I sat beneath the blossoming Pohutukawa tree, my siblings tugging at the branches as they climbed to the top. What was once one tree, was now a garden. Seven or eight grand trees stood tall in a circle. The leaves gave shelter to the busy critters on the ground.

I gazed out across the edge of the cliff. Seagulls soared freely in the clear blue sky, calling out to each other. I fiddled with my sparkling white shell. Flipping and turning it between my fingers. I felt a sense of calmness as I heard the distant sound of waves brush against the sand. The golden sun gleamed brightly across the ocean. It turned the sky from light blue to

a mixture of pinks, purples, oranges, and golds. Each color highlighting the edges of the clouds. While I watched as the sun seeped into the sea, I overheard the car door slam.

"Fish and Chips!" yelled Dad

My sisters scrambled down the tree. He lay our dinner out on the park bench. A hot salty greasy scent filled the air. We sat and watched as the sun vanished into the horizon. I was overflowed with joy to be back in Taranaki. A place where the branches of trees stretch high into the sky and where birds find rocky walls to use as shelter to raise their young. A place where the river runs from the top of the mountain to the sea and where the rolling waves chip away at the cliffs. I am sure, as time passes and I grow older, the hill that was once barren will become completely covered with the red trees.