

## The Visit

The old man wakes early, lies still in the dark, listening. The rain is barely audible above the pounding of the sea. High tide. A gust of wind blows through the tall trees behind the house catching the loose iron on the corner of the roof. The iron screeches as it lifts, then groans as it settles back into place as the wind passes. He meant to fix it last summer.

It's hard to get out of bed when the room is cold and his joints are stiff. He lies there until light. He hears the neighbours' back door open and knows they will be wondering if he is okay so he eases slowly out of bed and switches the light on to reassure them. He goes into the kitchen; looks at the clock. It's still early but his daughter will be at work now so he won't ring. Last year there was a short time when he thought she would bring the boy home. She lost her job. He doesn't know how someone with her education can lose their job. They insisted that their kids get a good education so that they would have the kind of jobs they could not lose. She got another job soon after and the thin line of hope that she might move closer to home grew brittle and snapped.

The boy needs to know where he comes from; the kaimoana at the front door, the fight of the kahawai, the depth and shifts of the tuatua. He needs to see the sand flurry of flounder as they wriggle from the lantern light at night and to learn the patterns of the tides so that he knows the best time to go for mussels and kina and paua. He wants the boy to come home before he is too old to teach him. This boy carries his name.

She said she would ring to let him know when they were coming up or maybe it was to say that they weren't coming up. He can't remember which. He's not sure about her partner, the boy's father. There's a tension there; something in his voice when he answers the phone. He boils the jug; the steam writhing up through the cold kitchen air. He opens the front door and a beam of pale wintry sun follows the cat in. The wood box is empty but there are some old fence battens stacked behind the shed. He can split those with the kindling axe. That'll be enough for tonight.

He feeds the cat, then, as he does every day, walks to the front gate and looks out to sea. The beach is a mess of storm-tossed seaweed. Mounds of long, fat lengths of dark brown bull kelp still attached to their round bulbs, ripped from the ocean floor, are mixed with shorter lengths of black bubble seaweed, knotted with sprays of feathery pink seaweed. Along the water's edge the falling tide leaves a rim of foamy, brown scum. A storm always brings in hanks of fishing net, rope, lengths of timber, traces and sinkers; all useful stuff. He smiles with anticipation, starts across the road then stops. He can't hear the phone from here. Maybe he will wait until the boy comes; teach him what to look for.

Later, he's dozing in the afternoon sun at the back door. A slight chill wind creeps around the side of the house, waking him. He cranes his neck to look at the clock above the stove and frowns because he thought it was later than that. He looks at the sun and knows the clock is right. The phone rings. He's almost afraid to pick it up in case she's changed her mind.

"Grandad."

"Hello, Boy."

"Grandad, in one more sleep I'm coming to your house."

“That’s good, Boy.”

“I packed my bag, Grandad.”

“What did you pack?”

His daughter takes the phone. She talks about times and distances and the arrangements for her partner’s kids. This is the second time round for him. The kids play sport in the weekends.

That’s why they can’t get home often, his daughter says. He doesn’t know.

“Put the boy on.” He doesn’t want her to talk herself out of coming.

“Grandad, when I come to your house can I watch television?”

“Boy, you won’t have time to watch television.”

Next day he’s up early. There is a lot to do. He cleans out the old ashes from the fireplace. The wood box is empty again. He crosses the paddock to where the axe leans on a pile of logs from the old pine trees felled along the fence line. He frowns. Pine splits easily but it is quick burning; doesn’t give much heat. He turns to a pile of old grey puriri fence posts. The wood is hard but it gives off the best heat. He wants the boy to be warm. He grinds the axe against the sharpening stone, picks it up, giving it a tentative swing. It arcs slow and heavy and lands with a dull thud on its side on the log. He straightens his back, steps back from the log, legs planted firmly apart, eyes focused. With both hands he swings the axe high and this time it floats through the air and the blade lands sharp and true exactly where he aims it, slicing the log in two, and for a fleeting moment he has caught the rhythm of his youth when he cleared this land and he feels the shadow of his wife beside him. The logs creak as they split. Chips fly into the air, spinning around and around before falling to the ground. It’s hard work and he’s soon tired and sits down on a log to rest, the early morning sun warm against his back. He rests for a bit then takes the logs in armfuls across the paddock and stacks them neatly in the box at the back door. When the boy comes he will show him where to collect dried pine cones for kindling. He won’t let him touch the axe. It is too sharp.

Neighbours call in. “Anytime now,” he says when they ask what time his grandson is arriving.

“Come over for a cup of tea.”

“No. I’ve got things to do. Things to get ready.”

“Well, come over when you’ve finished.”

“I’ll see,” but he doesn’t want to leave. He needs to be here, waiting for them. The day gives way to a dark, cold night. He draws the curtains, stokes up the fire.

“Don’t worry about tea. We’ll stop at McDonalds,” said his daughter, but he’s got a stew simmering on the stove just in case. The room smells of winter; of food and warmth. He pulls his chair up to the fire and waits, ears straining for the sound of her car. There is only the spit and sizzle of the fire and the gentle slap of waves against the rocks. He dozes then wakes with a start, swings around to look at the clock. It’s only 8pm. He pulls the curtains apart in the middle so that the light shines out onto the porch, because he forgot to get a new bulb for the porch light. He sits down in front of the fire again to wait. He wishes that he knew how far away they were.

Then light pours through the curtains. He’s out the door, standing in the rain watching as she eases up the drive. It’s dark in the car. He looks into the back seat but can’t see the boy. His daughter turns the headlights off, opens the door, slides out and hugs him.

“Dad, the traffic was awful. Don’t stand out here. It’s too wet. I’ll bring him in.”

“No. Let me.”

He peers through the window and sees the shape of the boy slumped low in his car seat, head lolling to one side in sleep. He opens the car door gently so as not to wake him. He fumbles with the catch on the car seat straps and the boy stirs.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you,” he says to the boy and he lifts him gently out from the tangle of straps and blanket. He holds him against his shoulder. The warmth of the boy mixed with relief eases into his bones as the first small wave sinks into dry sand at the turn of the tide. He holds him tightly and buries his face in his hair. The boy opens his eyes. He smiles.

“Hello, Grandad. I’ve come to stay at your house.”

“So you have, my boy. So you have.”