

A Game Of Cards

Witi Ihimaera 1972

The train pulled into the station. For a moment there was confusion; a voice blares over the loudspeaker system, people getting off the train, the bustling and shoving of the crowd on the platform.

And there was Dad, waiting for me. We hugged each other. We hadn't seen each other for a long time. Then we kissed. But I could tell something was wrong.

- Your Nanny Miro, he said. She's very sick.

Nanny Miro..., among all my nannies, she was the one I loved most. Everybody used to say I was her favourite mokopuna, and that she loved me more than her own children who'd grown up and had kids of their own.

She lived down the road from us, right next to the meeting house in the big old homestead which everybody in the village called 'The Museum' because it housed the prized possessions of the whanau, the village family. Because she was rich and had a lot of land, we all used to wonder why Nanny Miro didn't buy a newer, more modern house, But Nanny didn't want to move. She liked her own house just as it was.

- Anyway, she used to say, what with all my haddit kids and their haddit kids and all this haddit whanau being broke all the time and coming to ask me for some money, how can I afford to buy a new house?

Nanny didn't really care about money though. Who needs it? she used to say. What you think I had all these kids for, ay? To look after me, I'm not dumb!

Then she would cackle to herself. But it wasn't true really, because her family would send all their kids to her place when they were broke and she looked after them! She liked her mokopunas, but not for too long. She'd ring up their parents and say:

- Hey! When you coming to pick up your hoha kids! They're wrecking the place!

Yet, always, when they left, she would have a little weep, and give them some money

I used to like going to Nanny's place. For me it was a big treasure house, glistening with sports trophies and photographs, pieces of carvings and greenstone, and feather cloaks hanging from the walls.

Most times, a lot of women would be there playing cards with Nanny. Nanny loved all card games - five hundred, poker, canasta, pontoon, whist, euchre - you name it, she could play it.

The sitting room would be crowded with the kuia, all puffing clouds of smoke, dressed in their old clothes, laughing and cackling and gossiping about who was pregnant - and relishing all the juicy bits too!

I liked sitting and watching them. Mrs Heta would always be there, and when it came to cards she was both Nanny's best friend and worst enemy. And the two of them were the biggest cheats I ever saw.

Mrs Heta would cough and reach for a hanky while slyly slipping a card from beneath her dress. And she was always reneging in five hundred! But her greatest asset was her eyes, which were big and googly. One eye would look straight ahead, while the other swivelled around, having a look at the cards in the hands of the women sitting next to her.

- Eeee! You cheat! Nanny would say. You just keep your eyes to yourself Maka tiko bum!

Mrs Heta would look at Nanny as if she were offended. Then she would sniff and say:

- You the cheat yourself, Miro Mananui. I saw you sneaking that ace from the bottom of the pack.

- How do you know I got an ace Maka? Nanny would say. I know you! You dealt this hand, and you stuck that ace down there for yourself, you cheat! Well, ana! I got it now! So take that!

And she would slap down her hand.

- Sweet, ay? She would laugh. Good? Ka pai, Lalelale? And she would sometimes wiggle her hips, making her victory sweeter.

- Eeee! Miro! Mrs Heta would say. Well, I got a good hand too! And she would slap her hand down and bellow with laughter.

- Take that!

And always, they would squabble. I often wondered how they ever remained friends. The names they called each other!

Sometimes, I would go and see Nanny and she would be all alone, playing patience. If there was nobody to play with her, she'd always play patience. And still she cheated! I'd see her hands fumbling across the cards, turning up a jack or queen she needed, and then she'd laugh and say:

- I'm too good for this game!

She used to try to teach me some of the games, but I wasn't very interested, and I didn't yell and shout at her like the women did. She liked the bickering.

- Aue..., she would sigh. Then she'd look at me and begin dealing out the cards in the only game I ever knew how to play.

And we would yell snap! All the afternoon....

Now, Nanny was sick.

I went to see her that afternoon after I'd dropped my suitcases at home. Nanny Tama, her husband, opened the door. We embraced and he began to weep on my shoulder.

- Your Nanny Miro, he whispered. She's..., she's....

He couldn't say the words. He motioned me to her bedroom.

Nanny Miro was lying in bed. And she was so old looking. Her face was very grey, and she looked like a tiny wrinkled doll in that big bed. She was so thin now, and seemed all bones.

I walked into the room. She was asleep. I sat down on the bed beside her, and looked at her lovingly.

Even when I was a child, she must have been old. But I'd never realised it. She must have been over seventy now. Why do people you love grow old so suddenly?

The room had a strange, antiseptic smell. Underneath the bed was a big chamber pot, yellow with urine..., and the pillow was flecked with small spots of blood where she had been coughing.

I shook her gently.

Nanny ... Nanny, wake up.

She moaned. A long, hoarse sigh grew on her lips. Her eyelids fluttered, and she looked at me with blank eyes . . . and then tears began to roll down her cheeks.

- Don't cry, Nanny, I said. Don't cry. I'm here. But she wouldn't stop.

So I sat beside her on the bed and she lifted her hands to me.

- Haere mai, mokopuna. Haere mai. Mmm. Mmm.

And I bent within her arms and we pressed noses.

After a while, she calmed down. She seemed to be her own self.

- What a haddit mokopuna you are, she wept. It's only when I'm just about in my grave that you come to see me.

- I couldn't see you last time I was home, I explained. I was too busy.

- Yes, I know you fullas, she grumbled. It's only when I'm almost dead that you come for some money.

- I don't want your money, Nanny.

- What's wrong with my money? she said. Nothing's wrong with it! Don't you want any?

- Of course I do, I laughed. But I know you! I bet you lost it all on poker!

She giggled. Then she was my Nanny again. The Nanny I knew.

We talked for a long time. I told her about what I was doing in Wellington and all the neat girls who were after me.

- You teka! she giggled. Who'd want to have you!

And she showed me all her injection needles and pills and told me how she'd wanted to come home from the hospital, so they'd let her.

- You know why I wanted to come home? she asked. I didn't like all those strange nurses looking at my bum when they gave me those injections. I was so sick, mokopuna, I couldn't even go to the lav, and I'd rather wet my own bed not their neat bed. That's why I come home.

Afterwards, I played the piano for Nanny. She used to like Me He Manurere so I played it for her, and I could hear her quavering voice singing in her room.

Me he manurere aue.....

When I finally left Nanny I told her I would come back in the morning.

But that night, Nanny Tama rang up.

- Your Nanny Miro, she's dying.

We all rushed to Nanny's house. It was already crowded. All the old women were there. Nanny was lying very still. Then she looked up and whispered to Mrs Heta:

- Maka... Maka tiko bum... I want a game of cards....

A pack of cards was found. The old ladies sat around the bed, playing. Everybody else decided to play cards too, to keep Nanny company. The men played poker in the kitchen and sitting room. The kids played snap in the other bedrooms. The house overflowed with card players, even onto the lawn outside Nanny's window, where she could see....

The women laid the cards out on the bed. They dealt the first hand. They cackled and joked with Nanny, trying not to cry. And Mrs Heta kept saying to Nanny:

- Eee! You cheat Miro. You cheat! And she made her googly eye reach far over to see Nanny's cards.

- You think you can see, ay, Maka tiko bum? Nanny coughed. You think you're going to win this hand, ay? Well, take that!

She slammed down a full house.

The other women goggled at the cards. Mrs Heta looked at her own cards. Then she smiled through her tears and yelled:

- Eee! You cheat Miro! I got two aces in my hand already! Only four in the pack. So how come you got three aces in your hand?

Everybody laughed. Nanny and Mrs Heta started squabbling as they always did, pointing at each other and saying: You the cheat, not me! And Nanny Miro said: I saw you, Maka tiko bum, I saw you sneaking that card from under the blanket.

She began to laugh. Quietly. Her eyes streaming with tears.

And while she was laughing, she died.

Everybody was silent. Then Mrs Heta took the cards from Nanny's hands and kissed her.

You the cheat, Miro, she whispered. You the cheat yourself....

We buried Nanny on the hill with the rest of her family. During her tangi, Mrs Heta played patience with Nanny, spreading the cards across the casket.

Later in the year, Mrs Heta, she died too She was buried right next to Nanny, so that they could keep on playing cards....

And I bet you they're still squabbling up there....

- Eee! You cheat Miro...

- You the cheat, Maka tiko bum. You, you the cheat