



## A GAME OF CARDS

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

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

'Your Nani Miro,' he said. 'She's very sick.'

Among all my kuia, Nani Miro was the one I loved most. It wasn't one way either: 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 next to Rongopai meeting house in the old homestead which everybody in Waituhi called 'Miro's Museum' because it housed the prized possessions of the whanau — the feather cloaks, greenstone ornaments, and the shields and trophies which Waituhi had won in sports and culture tournaments. As children we always used to think she was rich because she owned the most shares in what remained of our tribal land. We wondered why she didn't buy a newer, more modern house. But Nani wasn't thinking of moving.

'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 asking me for money, what have I got left to buy a new house with?'

The truth was, that Nani liked her old homestead just as it was and didn't really care about money either.

'Who needs it?' she used to ask. 'What you think I had all my kids for, eh? What you think I have all my mokopuna for! To look after me, I'm not dumb!'

Then she would laugh to herself. But it wasn't true, really, because her family would send their kids to her place when they were broke and she looked after them!

She liked her mokopuna, but not for too long. She'd ring up their parents and say:

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

I used to like going to Nani's place with the rest of my cousins. In particular, I looked forward to Saturdays because that's when all the women would take the day off, and turn up at Nani's place to play cards. Nani loved all card games — five hundred, poker, canasta, pontoon, whist, hearts, euchre — you name it, she could play it.

The sitting room would be crowded with the women. There they'd be, dressed in their best clothes, sitting at various tables among the sports trophies and photographs, the carvings and greenstone. In those days, Maori used to be heavy smokers, so the women would all be puffing clouds of smoke, laughing and joking and gossiping about who was pregnant — and relishing all the juicy bits too.

Nani Miro was always at what was called 'the top table', reserved for the best players. Both she and Mrs Heta were the unrivalled champions and when it came to cards Mrs Heta, whose first name was Maka, was both Nani's best friend and worst enemy.

'You ready to be taken down?' Mrs Heta would ask. 'Oh, the cards are really talking to me today.'

'Is that so, Maka?' Nani would answer. 'We'll have to see about that, won't we?'

The women would begin to play cards. No doubt about it: Nani Miro and Mrs Heta were the queens of the game. They also happened, whenever they didn't have the right cards, to be the biggest cheats I ever saw.

Mrs Heta would cough and reach for a hanky while slyly slipping a card she wanted from beneath her dress. You never saw anybody renegeing as much as she did in five hundred — and expecting to get away with it! 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,' Nani would say. 'You just keep your eyes to yourself, Maka tiko bum.'

Mrs Heta would look at Nani, highly 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 come you know I got an ace, Maka?' Nani 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!' She would slap down her hand. 'Sweet, eh?' she

would laugh. 'Good? Kapai?' Sometimes she would do a little hula, making her victory sweeter.

'Eeee, Miro!' Mrs Heta would reply. 'Well, I got a good hand too!'

And she would slap her hand down too 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 Nani Miro when she was by herself, playing patience. That was her game whenever there was nobody around to play with her. And still she cheated! I'd watch her hands fumbling across the cards. I'd hear her say, 'Oops,' as she turned up a jack or queen she needed, and I'd join her laugh of triumph: 'See, mokopuna? I'm too good for this game!'

Nani used to try to teach me some of the games, but I wasn't very interested.

'How are you going to do good things for your people if you can't concentrate?' she would ask. 'Here I am, counting on you to get a good education so that you can get the rest of our land back and you're just hopeless, he hoha koe —'

Not only that, but 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, offer words of wisdom that didn't make sense like, 'Don't let me down,' or 'If you can't beat the Pakeha one way remember that all's fair in love — or cards,' and deal out the cards in the only game I ever knew how to play.

'Snap!' I would yell as she let me win.

Now, my kuia was sick.

I went to see Nani Miro that afternoon after I'd dropped my suitcase at home. The koroua, Nani Tama, her long-suffering husband, opened the door. We embraced and he began to weep on my shoulder.

'You talk to her, moko,' he said. 'She walked out of the hospital yesterday. She should go back there. It's no use me trying to persuade her; she's still as stubborn as, never listened to anything I say. But you —'

'I'll do my best,' I answered.

I walked down the hallway, past the sitting room to Nani Miro's bedroom. The room had a strange antiseptic smell. The window was open. Sunlight shone brightly on the big bed in the middle of the room. Underneath the bed was a big chamber pot, yellow with urine.

Nani Miro was lying in bed. Her pillow was flecked with small spots of blood where she had been coughing. She was so old looking. Her eyes were closed, her face was very grey, and her body was so thin, seeming to be all bones. Even when I was a child she must have been old, but I had never realised it. She must have been over seventy now. In that big bed, she looked like a tiny wrinkled doll.

Then I noticed the lipstick. Hmmn.

'You can wake up now, Nani,' I said sarcastically.

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.

She took me by surprise. 'Don't cry, kui,' I said. 'I'm sorry. I'm here.'

But she wouldn't stop. I sat beside her on the bed and she lifted her hands to me. 'Haere mai, mokopuna. Haere mai. Mmm. Mmm.'

I bent within her arms and we pressed noses. Then she started to shake with mirth and slapped me hard.

'Snap!' she said.

She started to laugh and laugh and I was almost persuaded she was her own self. But I knew she wasn't. Why do people you love grow old so suddenly?

'What a haddit mokopuna you are,' she grumbled, sitting up in the bed. '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.'

'There's no such thing as being too busy to see your kuia,' Nani reproved. 'Next time, make time. If you don't I'll cut you out of my will. I'll give it all to Willie Jones, what do you think of that?'

'Go right ahead,' I answered. 'Willie will need every cent to pay his fines so he doesn't go to jail.'

Willie was my cousin. When I was growing up I always thought that I was the only one Nani Miro talked to about getting an education. Ha, it was Willie who told me she talked to everybody, but I was the only one to take her seriously. Nani liked to spread her bets. That way, one of her cards was bound to do the trick.

'Anyhow,' I continued, 'I heard Maka cleaned you out in your last game of poker!'

'Who told you that?' Nani scoffed. 'You know, now that she's old she's gone colour blind. Can't tell a heart from a spade.'

She gave a big, triumphant grin. She was my Nani again. The Nani I knew.

We talked for a long time. She wanted to know how I was getting on at university in Wellington. I told her I was doing really well with my studies, which

was a lie, because I was seriously brainless and all the ambitions she held for me were rapidly going down the drain. She asked if I had a girlfriend so I made up more lies about who I was seeing and how pretty she was.

'You teka,' she said. 'Who'd want to have you!'

I brought up the subject of her returning to hospital.

'Tama's been talking to you,' she grumbled. 'Well, this is why I came home —'

She showed me all her injection needles and pills.

'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. Better for Tama to give me my injections. Better for me to wet my own bed and not their hospital bed.'

I played the piano for Nani. She loved *Me he manu rere* so I played it for her and we had a sing-along. Afterwards, she held my hands tightly in hers as if she didn't want to let me go, and stared deep into my eyes.

'It's always the women who look after the land,' she said, 'but who will do it after I am gone?'

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

But that night the koroua, Nani Tama, rang up. Dad answered the telephone and woke me.

'Your whaea, Nani Miro, she's dying.'

We all rushed to Nani Miro's house. It was already crowded with the other Waituhi families: the Tamateas, Tuparas, Waitaikis, everybody. All of Nani Miro's mates were crowded close around her bed. Among them was Nani's rival, Mrs Heta. Nani was lying very still. Then she looked up, saw Mrs Heta and whispered to her:

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

A pack of cards was found. Everyone sprang into action. The old ladies sat on the bed, began to gossip and, as usual, puff their clouds of smoke. Nani Tama suggested a game of poker in the living room, so all the men trooped in there to do some serious gambling. Wherever there was a table — in the kitchen, on the verandah, anywhere, games of cards started up. The kids played snap in the other bedrooms and, as the night progressed, so did the games, the laughter, the aroha. The house overflowed with card players, even onto the lawn outside Nani's window.

Suddenly, there was a commotion from Nani's bedroom. We all looked to see what was happening. The women had been betting on who would win the best of ten games and Nani and Mrs Heta were neck and neck — and Mrs Heta was squabbling with Nani because it was Nani's turn to deal.

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'Eee, Miro,' Mrs Heta said, 'don't think that just because you can deal fast I'm not on to your tricks.'

'Quit moaning and start playing,' Nani answered. 'Well?'

'Dealing all the good cards to yourself,' Mrs Heta muttered. 'You cheat, Miro.'

And she made her googly eye reach far-over to see Nani's cards.

'You think you can see, Maka tiko bum?' Nani coughed. 'You think you're going to win this hand, eh? Well, eat your heart out and take that!'

She slammed down a full house.

The other women goggled at the cards. Mrs Heta looked at her own cards. She did a swift calculation and yelled:

'Eee! You cheat, Miro! I got two aces in my hand already! Only four in the pack. How come you got three aces in your hand?'

Everybody laughed. Nani and Mrs Heta started squabbling as they always did, pointing at each other and saying:

'You the cheat, not me!'

And Nani Miro said:

'I saw you, Maka tiko bum, I saw you sneaking that card from under the blanket.'

She began to laugh. Her eyes streamed with tears.

While she was laughing, she died.

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

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

*Mā wai ra e taurima*

*E te marae i waho nei?*

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

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

I bet you they're still squabbling up there.

'Eee! You cheat Miro!'

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