

A Gift from Tohora

My name is Chance Mackenzie and I live out on the Bay of Islands road to Paihia, Northland. Our motel is the one set back from the eucalyptus trees. You can't miss it. The campsite is at the back.

Well, me and my busted leg with the pot on it were in charge of the whole thing during one warm day in February. See, Grandma had been ill and I could kind of look after her a little, not being at school. I could hobble around a bit on my crutches.

The family from the UK arrived about three in the afternoon and came to find me to see if they could book in. Well, I'm eleven, but with Grandma being ill and everything I reckoned I could handle the booking, so I said yes. I mean I can read and everything. They seemed pretty pleased when I showed them the campsite.

"What have you done to your leg?" the father asked.

"Oh, it got bust when I fell off that rock." I was cool about it. The rock was our look-out point, over by the track to the beach. Eric pushed me but he didn't mean for me to fall off. Eric's my cousin, with wobbly legs. We're not allowed to call him spastic any more.

The family put their tents up and had a wash and then came to find me again to ask if there was a bar, or a café or something.

One of the boys was having a look through the windows of the main cabin. He could see the pool table and the drinks machine. I had to tell him we didn't do food, but if he walked on a little way he could find a shop, and they could use the camp kitchen to cook something. He nodded at this. I told them that when the tide was out they could pick up pipi on the beach.

"Pipi?" he asked. He had no idea what pipi are.

"It's what we call 'em. Maori people like eating pipi. Little shellfish, like clams?"

"Oh those. We've seen them on the beach at low tide. How d'you cook 'em?"

I told him, but he didn't look like the kind of man who would go hunting for pipi, though the sons looked interested. I told him about the fishing and how when we catch a fish, a hoki or mullet, we think of the eyes and cheeks of the fish as the best bits. Soft and chewy. Non Maori people step away when they hear that, but it's the truth. The boys were sort of interested, though they pulled a face.

"Game of pool later?" the father asked. He was pretty friendly. Not too friendly. He was okay.

So we met up later when they had cooked up some meal in the canteen and eaten. It was getting dark and I turned on the strip lighting in the pool room. Nicau and Eric rolled up, fresh from a fishing trip, and I took Grandma her dinner and went back to join the pool game. Eric was just about able to play if he

could control his shaky hands and body, but Nicaou was good. They could usually beat me.

We played a few games and the family took turns. Mostly they beat me, but I did okay. Then my leg started hurting and I called it a day.

"Good game," said the father. "You're a good player, Chance, especially with that leg in plaster."

The others agreed. Eric sniggered. Nicaou didn't smile once. I went to look at Grandma. She was okay. Dad was sitting by the steps with a beer. He'd been back from work a while.

"Your grandmother says she's got something for you," he said. "Sounds like it might be important. You okay girl?"

"Sure Dad. I'll go and see her now."

Grandma was sitting by the window and light bounced off the cars as they came down the coast road. She watched them go past. The moko on her face really stood out in the light. She turned her head when I came in. I meant to ask her about her moko, but something always stopped me. If she told me I'd probably forget it and get into trouble. Anyway, people my age don't have moko. It's old fashioned. Grandma says it's the history of the tribe, so we don't forget how we came here from Hawaii.

I've seen the waka; been to Cape Reinga too. Dad took me. Grandma was looking at me:

"Grandma, Dad says you have something for me." I went closer to her. Her brown hand which had once been so strong, reached out and hooked my shirt.

"You're a good girl, Chance. I want you to have something. You see that box up on the shelf?" I saw it. It was a metal cash box, and it was locked. "Don't get it down. But when I die, it's yours. Remember." I wanted to see inside it of course, but Grandma didn't want to show me. She changed the subject: "What's your father having for supper?"

"Oh, some boil-up. I've saved some for you."

"Chance? Remember that box is yours."

"Yes, Grandma."

The UK family turned in about then and I was left sitting out there alone as Dad ate his boil-up. I thought he'd ask me about Grandma's gift but he didn't. I wondered a lot about the box. What could be in it?

"Dad? You know you said Grandma wanted to give me something? She showed me this box,"

"She showed it to me too. Said you ought to have it. I opened it when she wasn't there."

"And what was in it?"

"Some dirty brown stuff, in a lump. Looked like wax or something. But she thinks it's something special. More likely something she found on the beach tipped overboard from a ship. But if it keeps her happy..."

"When will Ma be back?"

"Tomorrow night. You'll be in charge again while I'm at work."

I was happy with that. I went to bed; my leg ached and itched. A sign it was getting better, they said.

But the next day when I took her morning drink, Grandma was in her bed and she wasn't moving. I put the cup down and tapped her shoulder. She was stiff and cold. Father had gone to work already. I was on my own.

I was pretty shocked to tell you the truth. She believed that when you die your soul flies to Cape Reinga and kind of leaps off the cliff-top, where it falls into the pohutukawa tree and gets all mixed up with the tree roots and stuff before setting out across the Tasman Sea. I hoped that her spirit, wherever it was, was at peace now. I had things to do.

Eric and Nicaou weren't much help. We called the ambulance and they came and took her away. I cried quite a lot. Father was on his way home; we couldn't get hold of our mother. Nicaou was keen to get into her room. He was bigger than me so I let him push past. He looked under the bed and opened all her drawers. I hated him for messing up all her things when she had only been dead a few hours. Then he saw the box:

"That's mine. She left it to me." But he grabbed it and because it was locked he searched around for the key. "It's

got some yucky brown stuff in it, Dad says." He threw the box on the bed.

I snatched it off the bed and took it to the room I share with Amber, when she's back from school. Later I looked for the key. It was on the keyring for the cabins, so I took it off and kept it in my pocket.

We were all pretty upset that evening, thinking about Grandma. The UK people asked a few questions, but we didn't want to upset our visitors, so I just said she was pretty old and had been ill and her body had been taken to the hospital morgue at Auckland.

"That's a shock," the father told me. "You were only telling us about her yesterday. She had a good life?"

"Yes. She gave me something before she died. I don't know what it is though."

"You mean you haven't got it, or you've got it but you don't know what it is?"

"She told me to have it. It's in a box, but I don't know why she thought it was important; it's just a lump of old brown stuff."

"Could I have a look?" He asked nicely. I saw Nicau listening. I didn't trust Nicau and I didn't want him to know what it was.

"Come across," I said. "I'll show it to you." The father looked at Nicau, then at me. He understood. We went across to my cabin and I brought out the box. Nicau was hovering.

"Can we take it inside for a proper look?" Nicau wandered away and the father and I, with one of the sons, sat on the bench and watched as I fiddled with the key and opened the box. I picked up the large, greasy lump of stuff and sniffed it. It had a strange, musky sort of smell. Then I passed it to the father of the family. He weighed it in his hands, sniffed it and prodded it.

"What do you think it is?" asked the son. The father looked outside the cabin to make sure no-one was listening:

"I think it might be valuable."

"What is it?"

"Well, I can't swear I'm right, but I think it might be ambergris. It comes from a whale and it's used to make perfumes - it's very expensive."

"Even like that, in a lump?"

"Yes. But don't tell anyone until we've had a chance to check it out. You don't want it disappearing."

"So that's why Grandma was so keen for me to have it!"

I should have known. She was no fool, my grandma. Whales swim up and down our coast all the time. I've seen them.

I sneaked indoors and looked for 'ambergris' on my father's computer. She was right. I looked at the contents of the box again. Then I looked at the screen. I looked at pictures. I looked at descriptions. How could I prevent Nicau, or my father, taking this stuff and selling it, and with it any dreams I might

have had of a decent education in Auckland, or of taking care of the family. I had an idea. I hid the box with its contents in the back of the shed, under a tarpaulin and I thought hard about making a lump of something that resembled ambergris so that anyone trying to steal it would get the wrong thing. Sounds crazy, but I was determined they wouldn't have it.

Waxy, a bit like soap, a bit like blubber... but the smell; the smell was amazing, I couldn't replicate that. However, I found a lump of lard in the canteen, rolled it in dirt, mixed it with candlewax from the bar (we had frequent power cuts) and a bit of boot polish and we had something resembling my legacy. I put the lump in an old sock and took it across to the shed, attached to one of my crutches. There I replaced the real ambergris with my lump of lard and hid it in the box again. The real piece was in the sock this time and I attached it securely to my crutch. I was about to leave when the shed door came open and Nicau came in.

"You trying to be clever, Chance?"

"What do you mean?"

"You hiding something?"

"No!" I shouted, banging my crutch down. I pushed past him. He ran straight to the back of the shed and lifted the tarp.

"Well you're not that clever, miss," he taunted, holding up the box. He looked hard at me. I could hear the father of



the UK family calling me. Nicau grabbed the box again and ran out of the door with it. I pretended to cry.

The father wanted to pay me for their stay. They were leaving early in the morning. He was unsure what to make of my pretence of crying. I asked him to follow me to the reception area, and as I hobbled the bag on my crutch swung around. He saw it.

"You want a lift to Auckland in the morning? I know somewhere that deals with that stuff."

"I'll have to ask my mother. She's back home tonight, but she'll say yes. They won't let me back in school until this pot comes off." He smiled at me:

"This is a chance for you, Chance. Run with it!" He wasn't joking. I saluted him, army style. I nearly fell over when I let go of my crutch. He was okay. It would be fun, going to town for the day with him and his boys. I slept with the ambergris under my pillow, just in case it all went wrong again. I would go down to the beach when I got back and send a thank you to the whale, Tohora, for this gift.

My mother was asleep when we left; she'd been late back, and my dad had already gone to work. It was just me. I told Eric and Nicau they were in charge and got my stuff together. Nicau was puzzled. He waved the box at me as we were leaving, but I never looked back.