

PAPA

A short story by Bruce Stewart

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I stayed all night at the cemetery with Mum. Dad's people tried to get me to go home. Mum's people stood around, they didn't say anything, they fumbled with the fresh earth at times, I think they knew I wanted to be alone with Mum. They left before dark. It was warm lying next to Mum, the night was a blanket, some stars zoomed across the sky. There was so much to talk about, about school, about our fairy glade, about the gardens, about the chookies, cats, dogs, and our birds. Mostly I was worried about what I should do next.

I feel so young, Mum. I know I've done well at sport and I'm tall and all that, but really I'm younger than the other boys my age. Like, most of them have girlfriends, and they shave. Mr Matthews tells everyone I've got a lovely soprano voice. I hate it when he says that, Mum, because I'm sure the bass singers laugh at me. I haven't seen them laugh, but they duck behind the tenors so's I can't see them. The truth is though, Mum, I love singing the solo bits with the whole choir behind me. But I won't anymore . . . not singing soprano, I won't. And there's another thing too, Mum, I'm shy of girls, when they come close to me my face goes all red. But it was warm on the earth next to Mum. Even when the sky started to flicker, and the change to the morning was warm. But as the blue paled, I felt a bit unhappy, it was like someone was taking off my blankets.

What now, Mum? I feel so rickety, what am I going to do? For a moment, just for a moment I looked up . . . there was a skylark . . . high above me.

She hung in a blue sky, singing tweedle songs. I listened, just as Mum taught me to listen at the fairy glade. It's true you know, what Mum told me, if you listen really hard, and if you want to, birds can tell you things. The skylark did, it was like Mum talking to me, telling me she'd always be with me. And to do what I thought was best.

When I got home I cut the back hedge; Mum had been at me for ages. I cut a big pile of kindling wood too. For the next week I did lots of jobs around home. I didn't feel like going back to school, but I did because I knew Mum would like that. My form teacher, Mr Bull, stopped me on the way in, he had a clipping from the funeral notices.

Simpson, on behalf of the school, please accept our sincere condolences for the recent and, I might say, untimely passing away of your mother er, ah . . . he quickly looked at my Mum's name on the clipping . . . er, Mrs Pare Simpson. Thank you Mr Bull, I said and sat down at my desk in the back corner of the class. We all knew Mr Bull's Second World War off by heart. He'd bought his photo album to school again. He was a tank commander.

Now here's a shot of myself with my tank. Here's another one with some of my company, you can see the tanks in the background. Now here's another one showing all the tanks on the move — you can just make out my head sticking above the gun turret. We were on our way to knock out Jerry. I might

say, they were rugged days. We were chasing Jerry across the desert. It was cold, at nights we'd knock the top off a forty-gallon drum of petrol and set it on fire to keep us warm. By day it was hot, by God it was hot. We ran out of water once, but luckily we had the tankers full of beer. the Horis loved it. They wallowed in it, even washed in it.

Everyone in the class roared except me. It was like saying my Mum washes in beer. I knew my face was red, and I was kind of numb when I stood up.

You are always going on about Maoris Mr Bull, I yelled.

Everyone stopped laughing. I could feel them staring at me. Some of them were whispering. Mr Bull's face went white and he took a while to answer. Sit down Simpson, I'm afraid you're over-reacting, though it's understandable in the circumstances. I'd like you to know Simpson that one of my aunties married a Maori. He was a well-known chief.

But I wouldn't sit down. It was like I was standing up for my Mum and myself for the first time, and it felt good. My face was still red, I was still numb as I stomped down the aisle, stood in front of Mr Bull's desk.

It's not just this story Mr Bull, you're always picking on Maoris, why? Why do you?

Mr Bull jumped up and leaned across his desk, our faces were inches apart. You've gone too far this time Simpson. Leave the room and report to the headmaster. I'll be there in a minute. On my way out the class sniggered again. Mr Bull's face was smirky-looking. It was those faces that set me going. I was so mad I wanted to smash them all. Those smirky faces, I'd always seen them from my desk in the rear corner of the classroom. I threw a box full of chalk and some books at the class. I threw a duster, it bounced off Mr Bull's head, I felt so good. Mr Bull rushed me. I grabbed his blackboard pointer and swung it as hard as I could, it wacked him fair in the guts. He doubled up groaning but he couldn't have been hurt too bad, because by the time I was at the end of the corridor he was setting his boys out to catch me. I was flying because I was scared, and I felt good somehow. If I got caught the headmaster would make me feel a fool in front of the whole school. He wouldn't understand me, he never does. By the time I got home I'd run off my angriness, I was trying to work out what to do next.

Some of Mum's photos and pieces of driftwood were gone. When Father came home I asked him what he had done with them.

I put the photographs in the top cupboard, I threw the driftwood out.

You got no right to throw out those things, you know Mum likes them. He stared at me as if I were simple or something.

It's about time you woke up young man, your mother's DEAD.

She's not, I know she's not. She'll always be with me. She said so herself. You're the one to wake up, not me.

I thought he was going to bowl me, but he didn't. He shook his head and went outside to his car, I followed him.

I'm leaving home.

You leaving home, that's a joke, you wouldn't last five minutes in the real world. You're a dreamer, mate, and you're still a fat puppy. Mind you, I left home when I was thirteen. Any rate y'got compulsory military training coming up, it'll knock a bit of sense into you. Leavin' home, he chuckled. He drove off.

I found the driftwood and photos. I put them back the way Mum had them. Two cops and Mr Bull banged hard on the door. I slammed the door in their faces much faster than I opened it. I ran straight out the back way across the paddocks into the swamp and hid there until they were gone. I sneaked back, grabbed my bank book, went the back way to town. I felt good, I'd never been like that, I was always shy and quiet. Now I knew I had to leave home, seemed like my mind was being made up for me, it wasn't the same any more.