

White Shoes

by Melanie Drewery

I'm in trouble again. This time,
I've really blown it. Gangs up
the road wait for me, wait like
sharks. I wasn't looking for
trouble, but my friends ...

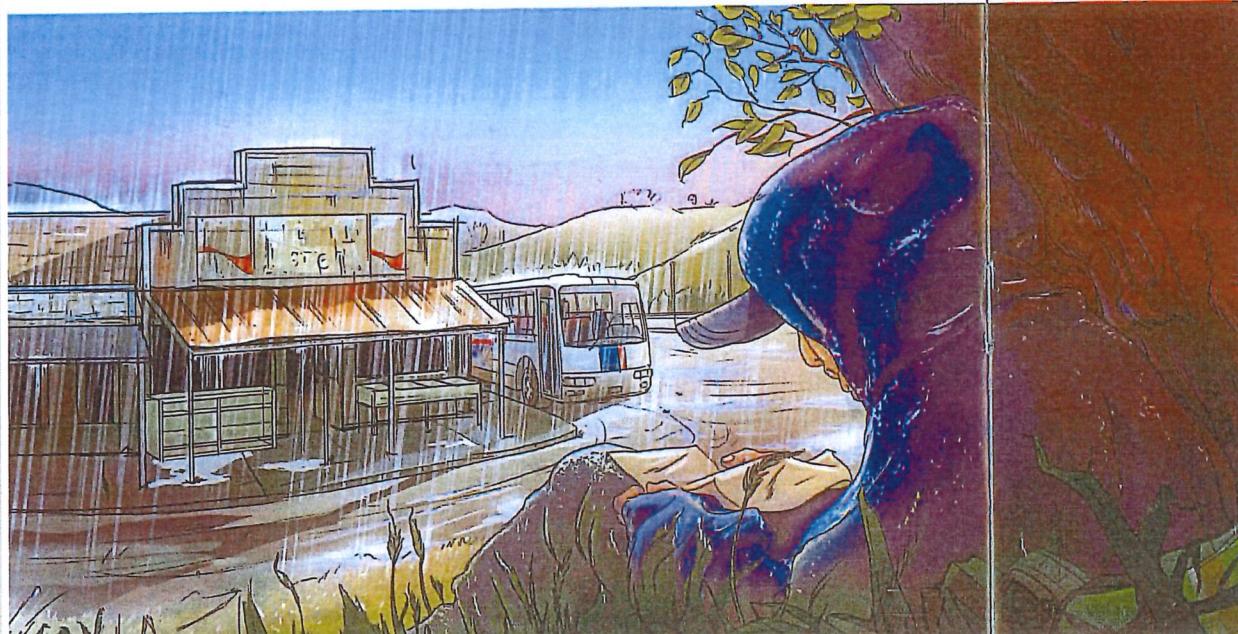
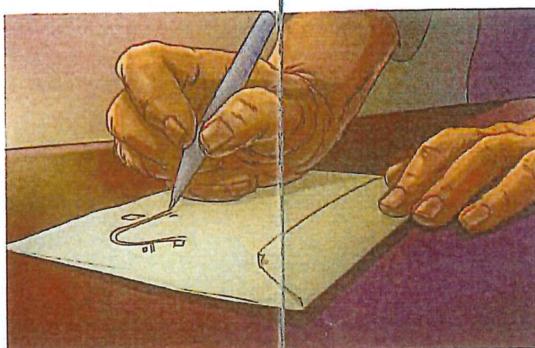
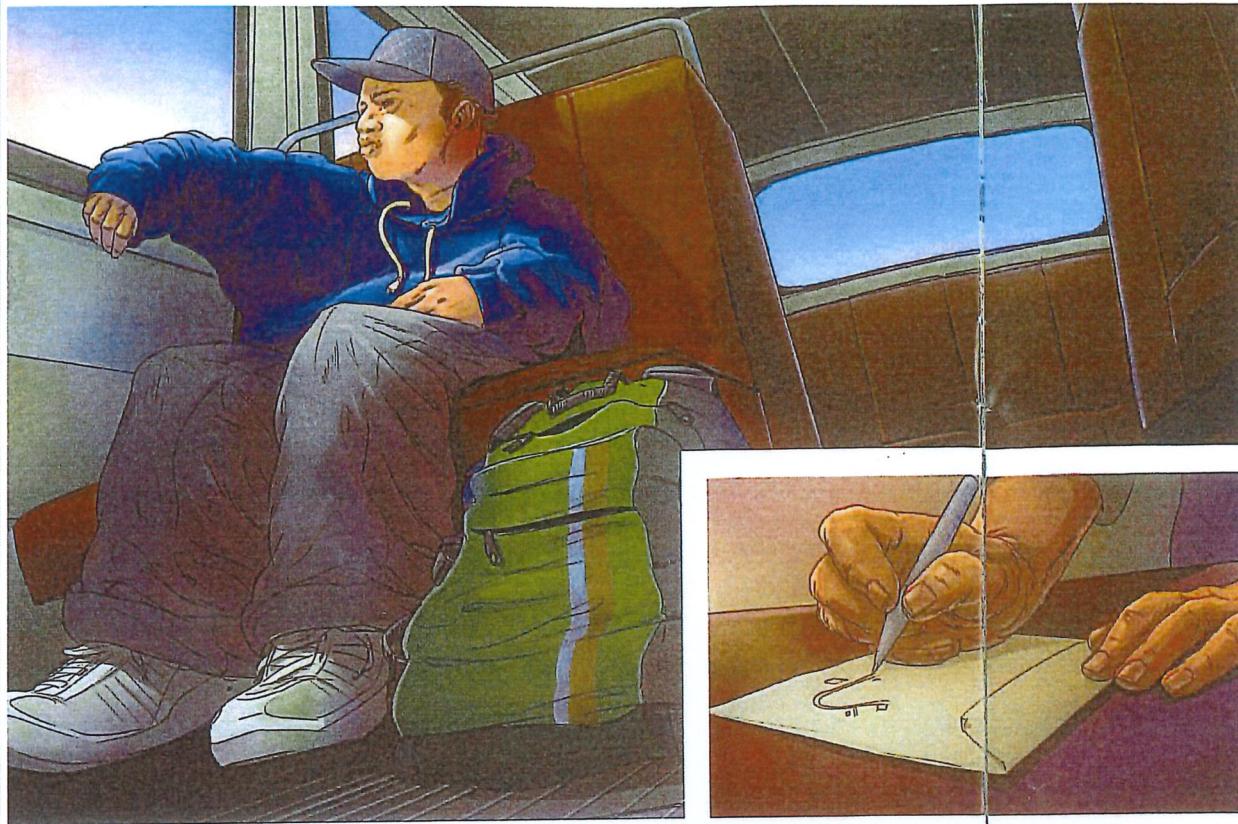
"This city's going to kill you," says Mum. "I'm sending you to live with Grandma. It's for your own good." Just like that. Goodbye, son, see ya round.

Now I'm on a bus to nowhere, back to the family land. Mum couldn't wait to get out of there when she was young, but she's still sending me. I won't be there long.

People get off the bus till I'm the only one left. "Don't get many passengers out here," says the bus driver. "It's usually only me and the mail."

I grunt and pull my cap over my eyes. I just want to get this over with. The road is narrow ... and gravel. I feel sick. The old lady better be there to meet me. She hasn't even got a phone, so Mum had to write to her. Can you believe that?





At last we're there. It's misty and near dark. There's no one to meet me. Maybe she's in the shop, if you can call it that. I wander in. The guy behind the counter stares at me. "Tēnā koe," he says.

"I'm supposed to meet my grandma," I say.

"Āe, ko wai tōna ingoa?" he asks.

"What?"

"What's her name?"

"I think it's Pourewa."

"Ah, ka pai, here's her mail. You can drop it off," he says, and he hands me the letter Mum sent. Great! No one knows I'm coming. He draws me a map on the envelope.

It must be my lucky day because when I set out, that mist turns into rain. I'm wet through, and my white shoes are coated in mud. This place sucks. I wonder what Mum wrote. The letter's getting soggy. It will be too wet to read by the time I get there anyway. I huddle under a tree and rip it open.

Kia ora Mum,

I'm sending Tamati to you. Give him a sense of belonging and pride. Teach him what it is to be Māori so that he can stand up and make the right choices in life.

Arohanui,

Mere

What rubbish - I always stand up for myself. That's what got me into this mess. And calling me Tamati. Huh! I'm Tom. I stuff the letter in my pocket and try to follow what's left of the map.

The house is just a tin shed up a muddy track. I knock, and the old girl creaks the door open. "Tēnā koe," she says, looking at me funny. "Auē, Tamati, is that you? Welcome home." This isn't my home. I give her the crumpled letter to stop her hugging me.

"I had to put it in my pocket to keep it dry," I say.

"That right?" she says, and I can tell she's got my number.

I miss my mates. The kids here have no idea about the real world. It's like another planet. They're not into any of the things I am. Everyone round here speaks Māori the whole time. It's like they don't want to speak English. They've got rules for everything, too. No shoes inside, no sitting on tables, no stepping over people's legs, pray before eating, pray before sleeping, pray before farting, probably.

"It's all about respect," says the old girl. "Respect for others and yourself."

I'm too tired for respect. We get up in the dark and work all day. I want to ask "Haven't you heard of supermarkets or electricity?" – but I don't. I think maybe there isn't much money ... or something like that.

After a month, I'm lean and strong. I'm picking up the language, too. The kuia reckons she's going to teach me about my whakapapa. She says she can trace me right back to the first chiefs. Still, I decide to head for home. My whakapapa can wait – I'm ready. Things will be different now.

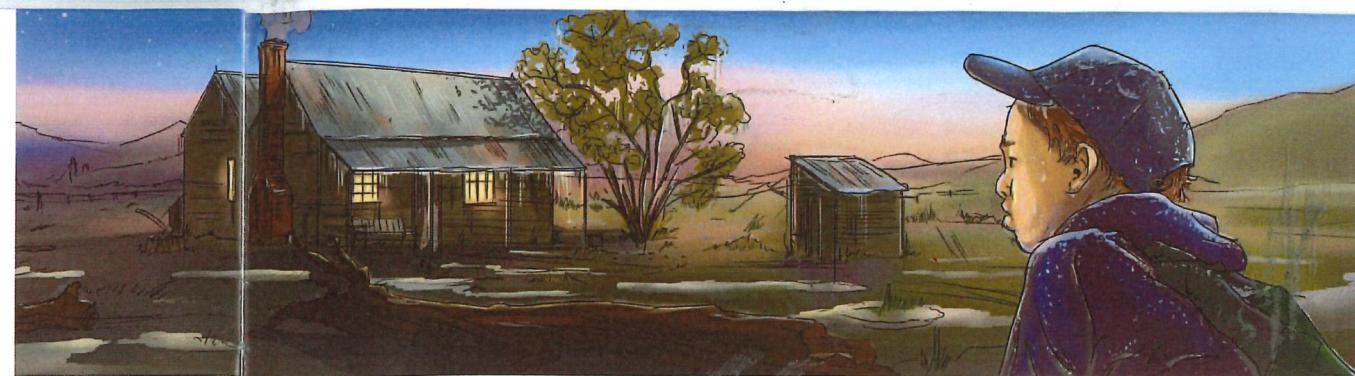
I walk nearly all day and get nowhere. I've got no food and no money, and my shoes are falling apart. I hear a car coming. It's one of the guys from the farm, in the old truck. "Hey, Tamati, it's time to come home," he calls. Oh, man, I'm actually glad to see him.

I'm quiet for a bit, just thinking.

"Do you want to learn how to drive this thing?" Hemi asks, getting out of the truck.

"Sure," I say. I'm surprised that he trusts me not to take it.

"It's a bomb," he says. "You'd never make it." Then he gives me a wink.



My kuia doesn't say anything about where I've been. She just asks how the woodpile is looking. And even though I'm tired, I go till after dark, catching up on the day's work.

My shoes finally die. Hemi gives me gumboots, but mostly I go barefoot. He's been teaching me about hunting and the ways of the bush. I've had heaps of practice driving with him, too. I get schoolwork in the mail. I can't skip classes with my kuia for a teacher. There's no point complaining either. She always says the same thing: "There's some wood needs splitting if you're bored." I'm staying just a bit longer. It's like now I'm in Aotearoa and my old home is New Zealand. Two different countries – and I'm not sure which one is mine.

A group from town visits our marae. I stand with my friends, and we give them a haka. We slap our chests and roll our eyes. We make speeches. I am descended from a great line of Māori warriors. This is my mountain, this is my river, this is my land. "Tihei mauri ora!" Behold, there is life. The words roll from my tongue.

When the greetings are over, we invite them inside. There's a pile of white shoes at the door. While the old people are leading the prayers, I overhear one of them say "Man, this is lame."

"Did you hear that boy?" I ask later. "Talk about rude."

"Āe ..." says my kuia, "he reminded me of someone."

"Who?" I ask.

"I don't know," she laughs. "Must be the shoes."

I smile and look at my feet. I guess I'm more comfortable in gumboots now.

