

Patupaiarehe

Rebecca Connolly

Mum's away again; that makes me in charge. She said it would be a shame to waste the good weather sitting around doing nothing. She's out in the hills. I'm looking after Mea again.

The beating hot sun peers down my t-shirt as I lie, karked out on the back lawn. Grassy prickles digging into my back and large sun hat shielding my face just enough so that, out of the corner of my eye I can keep watch on Mea.

Paint drips from the faded brush, bristles fraying as her sticky fingers wipe marks across the newspaper laying on the lawn. I groan to myself, imagining the havoc that her paint covered fingers could bring if she went back in the house.

"Oi, Mea. What are you making?" I call over to her.

She looks up, startled from her crouched position in the dry grass, grubby hands triumphantly holding out a brightly coloured box.

The old shoe box glints in the midday sun, fresh brush strokes haphazardly covering the now mostly yellow sides. The top oozes dark red paint, smudged slightly at the edges and running down to sloppily painted blue windows and a pink door on the side.

"Fairy house!" she calls up to me, placing the painted box down on the paper and looking back up towards where I lie. Mea's been on about fairies for a few weeks now; I do try my best to pretend I'm interested. Faking some curiosity is far easier to tolerate than a crying Mea.

"What sort of fairy is it for?" I reply, standing up to walk over to where she sits.

"The one in the garden. I saw her the other day." she gestures down the backyard to where the patchy summer lawn mellows into a cluster of misshapen trees. None of them are native. Maybe that's why they look so out of place. I tried to convince mum to plant a Kowhai there last Autumn - she said it would die. I guess some trees are better than none though, with their dry leaves and trunks pushed up against the back fence as though they too, like me, were wilting from the

midday heat.

“How about we go rinse your hands while the paint dries?” I laugh to her, pulling her bucket hat back down over messy hair.

Mea runs up the lawn to the outdoor tap, paint running in messy dribbles into the grass below. I crouch next to her, scrubbing at her hands until my t-shirt drips from splattered water and her palms no longer bear the marks of the slightly expired paint I dug up from the laundry cupboard this morning.

The tap sputters off as Mea looks at me, eyes level with mine and my crouched position, her face a mask of seriousness as she whispers, “Have you ever seen a fairy?”

I snort, as she scrunches her nose, “Maybe I have, maybe I haven’t”

“That’s not an answer” she grumbles back, feet stomping in the muddy, pooled paint water.

“Maybe” I whisper, as I take her hands, wiping them clean with a towel. “Maybe, I don’t believe in fairies.”

She kicks me in the shin. Hard.

“Hey, Mea! What the hell was that for?” I complain, clutching at my leg.

“You. Can’t. Say. That.” She mutters, hands clenching into fists and bottom lip jutting out as she sulks at me.

“Let me finish my sentence before kicking me next time Mea; or I’m telling mum. I may not believe in fairies” I whisper, voice getting low “but have you ever heard of the Patupaiarehe?”

“The what?”

“The Patupaiarehe”

“What are they?”

“I don’t know if I want to tell you anymore” I call out as I stand up and hobble through the back door into the kitchen. Mea runs in behind me.

“No! No! You have to tell me. You’re not fair”

I sigh at her pestering, grabbing a butter knife from the drawer and the bundle of flax sitting in the sink which Grace dropped off at the house earlier this morning.

“Help me prepare this for weaving and I might consider telling you.” I say, sitting down cross-legged on the lino. She glowers at me for a second, shoulders squared before reluctantly dropping down onto the floor next to me. Wordlessly I spread the flax in front of us. Grabbing a piece in my hands I fold it in half, nail scoring a line just past the centrefold, splitting the hard midrib off and leaving two soft strips of flax which I place to the side as I grab a new piece. Mea does the same.

“Way up in the hills, past the cities and the towns, and beyond the riverbeds that snake through valleys and eat away at hillsides, live the Patupaiarehe. Their skin is as fair as skirting boards and their hair shines a brighter red than the bricks in Leah’s front garden up the street.”

“Are they like fairies?” Mea whispers to me, leaning forward as she folds her flax strip in half.

“Not quite, while they may be a similar size to humans, a bit taller than you, they can be very hostile, especially if we intrude on their land. They live deep within the forests and mountains that form the backbone of the land, in large communities. Although” I add turning to look at Mea “Their buildings are completely invisible to the human eye.”

“But can we see them?” she replies, body now fully turned to face me, flax abandoned on the ground. I pause for a moment, leaning back to stretch out my shoulders and sweeping the flax strips into a pile, tapping one end on the ground, evening them into a smooth bundle.

“I suppose you can see them, but I doubt you ever would. They only come out when the sun has gone and the mountains are blanketed in darkness or on the odd occasion when the mist is so

thick that it clings to the tussock over the hilltops. In fact I even heard that they can even draw mist to themselves.”

“Do you reckon one will come visit us here?” Mea wonders as I pass her the flax bundle.

“Dream on. Look at the backyard, while you might be able to find a fairy or two in the trees at the end of the garden, there's no way there'd be any Patupaiarehe there. We are nowhere near the sorts of mountains that they live in.”

“So then how do I know that they're out there?”

“When you're older and your legs are longer, go up into the hills, past the cities and towns and beyond the riverbeds that snake through valleys and eat away at hillsides, and maybe, just maybe if you listen hard enough you may hear on the wind music that is sweeter than anything you've ever heard before. And” I tap her on the nose. “You are supposed to be helping me prepare this flax, not just sitting there being useless.”

She lets out a long sigh as she blows a curl of hair away from her face, digging her nails into the flax sections to divide them into smaller, thinner strips. I take the sections off her as she goes, and sway slightly away as I grab the butter knife and run it along the underside of the flax strips, softening them into pliable bands.

“So do you think they're real?” Mea asks finally.

“I don't know” I reply with a smirk “Maybe they are, maybe they aren't”

I wouldn't tell her, but I swear I did see one once. High up in the mountains where the jagged ridge lines meet the bush edge and thick clouds rake their fingers through the leatherwood. Where the wind wraps so tightly around you that your coat becomes plastered to your skin and your boot laces dance circles around your feet. I swear it was there in the distance, a shadowed silhouette etched clearly into the mist as midmorning patchy sunlight slowly broke through above me. Mum says it was only a 'brocken spectre'. I don't believe her. If I had listened hard enough, I reckon I could have heard sweet music clinging to the wind. Music sweeter than anything I had ever heard before. The music of the Patupaiarehe.

But for now, Mea is well behaved, sitting cross legged on the lino floor of the kitchen, bucket hat slightly askew as her unruly hair forms a flickering red halo in the afternoon sun. As one by one, we carefully lay the flax strips in a line, ready to start weaving.