

That's What Made Her Feel Loved

Merekara Te Tau Rupapere

Once on a bed, under her favourite Barbie blanket, she dreamed. She dreamed she was a princess ruling over a beautiful kingdom. She woke up excited to tell her mum who would smile back and say *"I love your imagination, honey."* Her parents would sing and dance with her, telling her about how to be respectful towards her peers, and how much mummy loves her more than daddy. She made lots of friends at school and always rushed to be the first to answer questions. This was her first year of primary school and the young girl loved it. Her parents were so proud of her, and treated her with blue bubble gums, sour red lollipops, sweet yellow jelly beans and dark chocolate drops. She didn't really like the chocolate but loved the others. Her favourite part of the day was going home to enjoy the last of her packed lunch with her parents. Every night they tucked her into bed with a story and she would ask them to stay until she was asleep. That's what made her feel loved...

Once on a bed, under a fluffy mink blanket, she had a dream. She dreamed about her friends. She'd wake up and say *"I'm glad I have such nice friends."* Then her mother would drive her to school, singing to whatever was on the radio then telling her to *"have a good day sweetheart"* as she got out of the car. But this year was the first year she was without her dad and she wasn't used to it. Mum hadn't been the same since he left. At school she didn't rush to be the first to answer questions but instead wanted to yell out the best joke. She'd come home to her mum and make an after-school snack. When her mother would ask how school was going and the girl would say *"Yeah... it was alright"*, then she would disappear to her room for hours. When it got late, her mum would come upstairs and tell her to go to sleep. She would imagine that it was her father coming to say that he was home, but it never was. She always hoped it was him because she didn't like the feeling of absence.

Once on a bed, under a plain brown blanket, she didn't have a dream. She had a nightmare. A nightmare about not being good enough because that's all the world was telling her. She didn't talk to her mum because her mother never understood. They would drive to school in a quiet car and her mum asked if she was keeping up with her schoolwork. She'd nod and put her earphones in. This year she was trying her best. She had friends but would often sit alone at the back of class, gazing out the window. For a short while people would check up on her, but she preferred her own company. When she got home she would skip dinner and head up to her room. Talking to her mum used what little bit of energy she had left. She felt empty. This year a rumour went around that she was caught doing drugs in the school bathroom and her "friends" were embarrassed to be seen with her. She started skipping

school, failing classes, arguing with her mum and lost her friends. She had fooled herself in believing she had gotten over not having her dad, but the pain in her heart grew bigger. On many nights she took bubblegum blue pills to erase that feeling, and would make a bet on whether she would wake up the next day, all because she hated the feeling of emptiness.

Once on a black couch, under a thin throw blanket, she tried. She tried to dream but couldn't fall asleep. When the sun came up she thanked her friend for giving her a place to sleep. Then she would call her mum who picked up the phone with a weary voice. The girl said she just needed some money for some clean clothes but her mum never believed her since it happened. This was the year she got kicked out of home for almost overdosing in front of her little brother. She often stayed at different houses but always found a couch to crash on. This year her younger brother graduated and she couldn't help but cry as she watched her mother smile proudly when he walked across the stage. She regretted attending because of how hopeless it made her feel and realised her chances of achieving her childhood dreams had faded away. At the end of that day she would take a red sour pill, a sweet yellow one too and tuck herself into bed. She'd wonder if anyone was going to help her because she absolutely hated the feeling of being alone.

Once on a park bench, in a thick jacket, she finally had a dream. It was a dream from her childhood. A dream of her mother cooking dinner while she and her father were outside playing hide and seek. She saw her old school friends and remembered how much she loved school. She saw her entire life flash before her eyes - the person she was now and the person she wanted to be, but then she woke up. This year she couldn't find friends to stay with. It was also the year her mother changed her number and address. She always woke up to city noises, loud traffic and footsteps. She spent her days reaching out for anything from people walking past. Food, change, a conversation, something to make her feel like someone. But she never got it. People would just walk past and she felt like the piece of rubbish that no one wanted to pick up. She would just sit, numb, in the same spot every day. Feeling like trash didn't matter anymore.

Once on a bed of concrete, under the light of the moon, she had been thinking. Thinking about what her mother was doing, thinking about where her brother was now and thinking how her dreams were never accomplished. She wished she hated the pills but they were the only thing that was always there for her. The pills made her feel better. Better than anyone else did. She felt unloved and hated the feeling of rejection. She often thought about putting herself to sleep, then maybe someone - anyone - would find her and finally care about her as the princess she once was. She decided that night she would use every pill she had left.

The bubble gum blue pills, the sour red pills, the sickly sweet yellow pills and the bitter black pills. She looked up at the stars, with tears streaming down her face as she swallowed each pill, one by one. As she faded away into her final dream, she called out to her mother and her father asking for one more bedtime story because that's what made her feel loved.