

Once Were Warriors

And he was talking in English, tellin em all gathered at his feet, his constantly moving feet, that their inheritance was their past and without the past they were nothing and, why, indeed, they had been nothing till he and his tribal elders and helpers and committee members came along at the request of this woman here, Beth, who used to be a Ransfield when she belonged to us. Hadn't been for not so much us but what we bring, the knowledge the knowledge of your great history, your illustrious ancestors, then you lot, boy, I have to tell you fullas and you girls and women (and there woulda been a hundred, oh, over a hundred ofem gathered there on the front adjoining lawns of Numbers 27 and 27B Rimu Street) you lot were gonna kill yourselves. Tapping his heart area, the paramount chief, Te Tupaea, and then his forehead. Dead in your heart, so dead in your minds. So.

He breathed out a long sigh and the people they shifted position and tried to make out it wasn't freezing but it was hard, boy was it hard; just as he, this great chief come amongst them, was hard. And some lit cigarettes and the smoke got instantly snatched by the chill wind but still no one got up and moved off to warmer parts, not even the kids, the unwanteds whose needs'd got one woman starting all this; they just sat there. And listened as history flowed down on them from above.

He told them of great acts of chivalry during the warring with the first white men: of warriors that's Maori warriors slipping out into the battlefield at night to tend to the wounded enemy, giving the enemy food, drink, even touches of comfort. And the gathering going, Wow, far out, but why? And the chief's eyes with that fighting fire in them saying: So the enemy might have more strength to continue the battle in the morning. And the crowd went, Ooooh! Smiling all over. Thinking: But we never knew that.

No one taught us this at school. They taught us their history: English history. They forced us to learn, off by heart, dates and names of great Englishmen and battles fought in a country none of us have ever been to nor are likely to go. And they gave us no marks in our exams when we couldn't remember these dates and funny names and strange-sounding places, and they never understood that to remember things of knowledge ya have to have fire in your belly for it, like the great chief there, or just ordinary passion of wanting to remember it because it, well, it's about yourself, historical knowledge most easily remembered.

And the chief putting into words their vague thoughts, giving their minds a shape they could visualise: We fought em at every turn. We never gave up. They came to this land with their queen and kings, and we, the Maori, set up our own king in defiance of them. YOU HEAR THIS? And the crowd roared, YESSSSS!!

And when they knew we would never give up they signed a treaty with us. The Treaty of Waitangi. You all heard of that? YESSSS!! You all know what it was? Individuals answering they thought it was an agreement between two peoples to share the land, its resources. As equals! their fiery chief exclaiming.

A contract! IT WAS A CONTRACT. Then silence.

And just the coughs and sighs and rustle of movement.

Te Tupaea just stood there, legs astride, fists on suited sides. A contract... Whispering it, so the ones at the back had to ask what'd he say, and then their whispering dying down. And Te Tupaea again whispering: Which - theybroke.

Suddenly he was bursting into a roaring cry signifying the start of a haka. And so a line-up of older males behind him stood. Like a row of fierce-faced guards. And they danced. The dance of war. The expression of anguish. A dozen, no more, thundering voices led by their chief. A dozen chest-slapping, thigh-slapping, elbow-slapping, arm-out-thrusting, arm-dancing, feet-stomping Suddenly he was bursting into a roaring cry signifying the start of a haka. And so a line-up of older males behind him stood. Like a row of fierce-faced guards. And they danced. The dance of war. The expression of anguish. A dozen, no more, thundering voices led by their chief. A dozen chest-slapping, thigh-slapping, elbow-slapping, arm-out-thrusting, arm-dancing, feet-stomping warriors from yore. And this man in a suit and a carved walking stick dancing back and forth across their front, twirling his tokotoko this way and that. Gold fob watch flying. Spit flying. And joined by four women, who launched themselves into it with even greater ferocity than the men.