None of them had expected Toi to be any good as a weaver, because, like his body, his fingers were short and square. But sensing the need for this man to hold onto something with long roots, the women had one day introduced Toi to a stand of flax.

There were many things Toi liked about flax, starting with the way it made him feel when he was cocooned inside its cool cathedral of leaves, listening to the hollow clatter they made in the wind. And the press and slide of the mussel shell against the dull underbelly of the leaf, forcing the greenness to fall away and reveal the silken wefts inside. Then, at the end of the day, when the women had gone home, Toi liked to stand with his bare feet flat against the wooden floor and breathe in the bittersweet smell that the flax left behind.

But while the women were impressed to meet a man who loved flax as much as Toi did, they believed that his desire to weave was transitional. Each morning when he turned up at the space, they would look up from whatever they might be weaving, their mouths slightly open in surprise. Then after a second or two of taking him in, the snap, crackle and flick of flax would continue. Not one of them imagined that in two years, Toi’s wedge-shaped fingers would be outtwisting, outbending and outknotting all of theirs.

But now here he was, Toi. Circled by loud, laughing women weavers, in a room earthy with the smell of muka, weaving a kākahu made from feathers of the purest black.

Before Toi’s fingers found the rhythm that came with making patterns – the over one, under one weave of taki tahi; the over
two, under two weave of taki rua; the stairways of poutama and the canine peaks of niho taniwha – he had been a person who didn’t take the time to remember the past, or plan the future.

Before the time of patterns, Toi had been all about what was happening now.

This didn’t mean he’d had a past that he wished to forget, but instead one that he’d never belonged to, full of people who looked better, spoke better and who sat more comfortably with each other than they did with him.

And so, at a very early age, Toi decided that instead of engaging in life, he’d tread lightly along the top of it and not let it catch him.

If Toi looked backwards to his past, he saw a never-ending blackness. Once inside of it, he could make out the thin, luminous line that was the curve of his mother’s back. As he walked towards her he found himself growing smaller and smaller, until he was his five-year-old self again.

Toi buried his face in the material of his mother’s shirt. It smelt of washing powder. He put his ear to the ground and heard the mumbled voices of his sisters and brothers and the mosquito-like whine of his father’s trout fishing line as it sliced through the air, cutting into the shine of the lake. But none of these pictures, sounds or smells stayed around long enough to take real form.

Since Toi was a man who had no real past, he understood that it was dangerous to think about the future. The ground he stood on was a thin biscuit of washing powder. If he craned his neck suddenly to look ahead, it would crumble, turning into an avalanche of whiteness that would slide down the bank and into the lake, taking him with it. The lake would finish him off, drowning him in a churning whirlpool of foam.
Scared of what was both behind and in front, Toi had learnt to make his present-day self become nearly invisible. So, even though he was a solid man, people looked right through him.

But today, as he carefully twisted and half-twisted aho around whenu and secured black feathers onto the growing kākahu, he saw his past begin to thicken and grow, and he didn’t flinch.

Toi had met Ru in the same way, in the same place, at the same time, that he met all the women he slept with – at the nightclub that stood on the hill beside the lake, at midnight. The club was dimly lit, but every time the door to the Ladies squeaked open, a blade of light would shoot across the space, slicing through whatever lay in its path. This included Ru’s head of bright hair. So when Toi looked up, his eyes were stung by the flash of her. An hour later Ru appeared at his side. She pulled at his shirt like a child and said, ‘I want to go now.’

And in the early hours of the morning, as Ru skipped and tiptoed along the Rotorua footpaths beside him, her hair caught the beams emanating from streetlamps and cars. A few small insects fluttered around its glow.

When they got back to the unit, Toi turned on the light and immediately felt ashamed of its plainness. The brick walls were the same dirty cream colour as the roof and the carpet was thin and grey. The only decoration in the place was a calendar. It hung limply from a nail by the fridge. The man from the dairy had given it to him. Inside it were images and information about the things you could buy from the man’s shop. January was ice cream, February was peanut butter and March was all about Milo.

Ru looked around the room and made a clicking sound with her tongue. Then, reaching up with her leg she turned off the light switch with her toe.
Everything went black.

That’s when Toi saw who this young woman really was. While Toi was strong and heavy, Ru was as small and delicate as a bird. Every part of her looked as if it had been carefully sculpted out of polymer clay, using dentist’s tools. The spirals of a moko kauae lightly dusted her chin, and Toi imagined they must’ve been painted on using brushes made out of spider webs. Much later, when they were in his bed, Toi could feel the slender frame of her skeleton beneath him and was scared that the weight of him might snap her.

He had woken late that morning to a sweep of cold air across his face and found her gone. The window had been opened just wide enough for someone with a body as slim as Ru’s to slip through. Standing outside with a mug of tea he saw the wet prints of small feet on the driveway, and there was a violet scarf stuffed into the letterbox. Looking out onto the lake he thought he saw a figure skipping across its steamy surface, but then it disappeared and he wasn’t sure if it was real. People were always seeing things on that lake that weren’t really there.

Toi decided to keep the scarf. He hung it in his wardrobe. It caught his eye every time he looked for a shirt.

Something in Toi changed after he met Ru. His job in the Warehouse office where he had spent years counting, adding up and ordering plastic toys, outdoor equipment, kitchenware and shovels, had once been enough for him, but now it seemed pointless. He used to look forward to his Friday nights, but now the nightclub where he went to get drunk, pick up women and joke with other men reminded him of the bottom of his rubbish bin. It was damp, smelt sour and was alive with wilted and unwanted things.
Toi was sitting on his doorstep one morning thinking about all of this when he heard a loud shriek of laughter. The squeal was joined by another squeal and then a snort. A river of chuckling followed.

Over the road, Toi saw seven pairs of legs walking down the narrow footpath. The bodies and heads attached to the legs were obscured by bunches and bunches of trembling flax leaves. Toi couldn’t help himself. He followed the seven pairs of legs and eight bunches of flax and the river of chuckles, to the weaving space. At the door the women put down their flax, narrowed their eyes at Toi and placed their hands on their hips.

‘Why are you following us? they asked him. Toi shrugged, which made one of them guffaw for some reason.

‘Better watch out, we’re all on the lookout for new husbands, us,’ said one.

‘I need a bloke like you to mow my lawns, and can you cook and clean and paint my house as well?’ said another.

‘Sounds like we’re going to have to share you, one day each,’ said the tallest of the seven, who always had the last word.

Toi wasn’t scared by their carry on. Instead of running he looked at his feet for one thoughtful moment, then followed the women inside.

They told him he should give the first basket he wove to someone he was grateful to. Toi had placed the bright green kono on the surface of the lake and watched as the current took it away.

‘Thank you and goodbye, Ru,’ he said.
But it wasn’t until he started weaving the kākahu that he realised Ru was someone he didn’t want to forget – and nor would he, for just a year later Toi came home to find his sister standing in the kitchen with a bellowing baby in her arms.

‘I came to borrow your weed eater, and a girl turned up holding a kid. Oh my god, Toi! Did you sleep with her? Anyway she told me she couldn’t look after your baby any more. Toi, why don’t you wear protection? Why don’t you take some responsibility for your actions? Why don’t you just ... I mean, you know what’s gonna happen, don’t you? You’ll be done for maintenance and Mum and Dad will end up with this angry baby and they’re old, Toi. Old, old, old! Don’t look at me like that! I can’t help you. I’m not the maternal type. Besides, I’m leaving. Moving to Dubai for work.’

Toi pulled back the blanket and looked at the baby in his sister’s arms. She had big black eyes and a wide mouth. Her hands were clenched fists and her legs already looked solid enough to hold the weight of her body. He imagined now hard it would be for this loud giant of a baby to grow up in a house full of tiny-boned, bright-haired people like Ru. She was a squawking, shining cuckoo who had been placed in the wrong nest and he knew just how that felt. The difference between the baby and him was that she wasn’t scared to let people know she was angry.

Toi took the child and held her close. After a moment she stopped crying and burrowed her wet face into his chest. His sister put her hand to her mouth and gasped. ‘Well, would you look at that? She knows who her Papa is.’ It was the first time he’d clung to someone for more than a heartbeat and he knew in that moment he was never letting this child go.
While all around him the weavers talked and laughed, flax rustled and his sure-footed child laughed, screamed and stomped, Toi sat back in his chair and took in the half-finished kākahu.

Reaching into his bag he pulled out Ru’s violet scarf. He placed one of its tassels in the middle of the sea of black feathers and secured it tightly.

There it sat, a small light flickering.

Below this halfway mark of his life, Toi saw the trembling threads of his future. They fell in a delicate veil waiting for his thick-fingered self to turn them into something beautiful.

The End.
Hina’s hair trailed down her back like a wave of fizzing, hissing sea foam. Her eyes were shiny, as if someone had smoothed glad wrap over two buttons of the greyest sky and pushed them deep into the lunar whiteness of her skin. She was the only girl in a home full of brothers. Like so many male Prime Ministers and Presidents, these four boys, named Maua-mua, Maui-taha, Maua-pae and Maui-roto spent their time trying to prove to each other that they were the best at anything and everything that they happened to be doing be it boxing, scoring goals, pissing or nose picking. The brothers were like an extension of the same person, except for small differences they all looked similar and once one started an action, they all copied it, only the next in line would do it more loudly, violently and with much more swag. From sunset to sunset poor Hina was smothered in a boy-tsunami of legs, arms, body odor and noise.

It was only in her mother’s presence that there was peace. The children’s mother Taranga was a lighthouse in a raging testosteronic sea. Straight backed and sure footed, she glided through the turbulent boys negotiating the trouble spots, picking up clothes and toys with her feet, tossing them into the air and catching them in her long fingered hands. Her voice was a laser strike of honey that broke through the two-metre thick wall of thumping, banging and shouting, forcing the brothers to all shut up and listen.

‘Brush your teeth, you fullas, and get to bed, I’ll be checking on you in fifteen minutes,’ she would say, and, anxious to please, all four brothers would jump to their feet at once, sprint to the bathroom and begin the squirt, scrub, spit and rinse of tooth brushing.

Taranga secretly embraced the boys’ need to be the same. It made things so much easier than raising a group of kids that wanted to be different. The boys all liked to wear the same clothes, so shopping was easy and, at mealtimes, they stood in a line with plates in hand, happy to be dished up whatever servings and amounts of pretend meat and veges the one next to them was eating. The family lived in a time when the world had been destroyed by war and there was nothing alive anymore to eat or drink, excepting of course, people, and one result of living in a world that had no life was that no more life could be made.

‘I am so lucky to have had youse and I must remember to treasure every moment.’ Taranga would often say to her children, and indeed when she was with them she gave them all of her attention. The only time she drifted off was during those times when she would sit on the couch and let Hina plait her blue-black hair. As her hair was brushed, oiled, parted and plaited the light in
her bright eyes would go out, and Hina knew that Taranga was thinking about their father, a man that none of the children had ever known. Their father, Makea-tu-tara was the leader of the rebellion and he lived in the underworld but no one knew where that was.

Anyway on one particular morning Hina awoke to her brothers barking and rolling around on the floor like puppies, the toilet seat up and the walls plastered with their artificial Weetbix, and she knew straight away that Taranga wasn’t home. This was surprising because her mother never left the apartment building without telling Hina, her most sensible child, first. ‘I’m going to the warehouse to trade for more fake food,’ she would say or ‘I’m going to visit Mahuika and have a glass of her bootleg because I am losing the plot’. Mahuika was Hina’s grandmother. Her eyes and freckles were the colour of flames. She wore bright kaftans and was forever flashing her long well-manicured and glittery nails. Mahuika lived in a top-floor penthouse in another apartment building, on the better side of town. Mahuika was the only person in the city who knew how to make fire out of nothing, and her services were in high demand, especially during times when there was no power, which was most days. Any source of brightness was treasured. The sun outside had long since been smothered by ash and pollution. No one was even sure if it even existed anymore. The world outside was eternally grey.

Knowing that something must be wrong for her mum to disappear unspoken, Hina unbolted the apartment door and walked in her tippy-toed way along the hallway. She stepped into the lift and pushed the button. As she waited for it to move she listened to the Southerly – which had long ago become trapped in the lift shaft – scream and whip its dragon-like tail. She breathed in the sting of urine that snaked its way into her senses from the dark, sticky corners of the lift and as the light around her began to dance she closed her eyes so she didn’t see the ancient faces that appeared mid-flicker. So, by the time the lift closed its rusty jaws, Hina was flying so deeply inside the cosmos of her six-year-old thoughts, it took her a moment to realise that she wasn’t the only non-ghost in the space.

There on the floor, a pile of long limbs and hair, was Taranga. Hina could see that in her arms she held something. A baby. An umbilicus twisted and striped like a candy cane that trailed from the baby’s puku up inside the place between her mother’s legs. The baby’s face was as smooth as a pebble, his nose had no holes for breathing air and his eyes were welded shut, and because he hadn’t been ready to trade the water of Taranga’s womb for the land, his feet and hands were webbed.

Hina gasped and bent down to touch him and felt that he was cold. Without taking her eyes from her baby, Taranga said, ‘His
name is Maui Tikitiki a Taranga, and he is the last child ever to be born into this world, Hina. We must do what we can for him. Push on my puku girl.’

Hina pressed down on the bulge of her mother’s belly. Taranga exhaled deeply and out gushed the placenta. Three times the size of the baby, it was purply and translucent, like a jellyfish with what looked like a tangle of blue and purple electrical wiring, showing just beneath its surface. Unlike the baby, it pulsed and throbbed with life.

‘Now cut off my hair and weave your brother a basket so he can be warm,’ Taranga instructed her daughter.

Hina extracted the pocket-knife she kept hitched to her belt and ran her finger along the blade lightly. A gift left to her by her underworld father and crafted from underworld steel, it was always sharp. Hina watched it draw a thin line of blood. Then, taking a handful of her mother’s slippery, shiny hair, Hina began to cut.

Wearing orange radiation suits and masks, Hina, Taranga and the baby, who had been placed against his mother’s breast, zigzagged, ducked and dodged their way through the city. They had to be careful of snipers who crouched in waiting on the rooftops ready to shoot anyone who passed. If they were killed, their bodies would be sold and consumed by royalty or sold to the scientists for testing, but human cells died quickly outside of the body and the days of cloning were long gone. The human race was all but dead.

Taranga and Hina climbed the two thousand stairs that lead to the top of the giant wall that kept the monster sea from escaping into the city. The sea raged below, its surface littered with plastic, polystyrene and tin. Hina had grown up listening to her mother’s stories about swimming in that sea. ‘It was my favourite place,’ she told her. ‘There was a beach with sand to lie on and dig up. The water didn’t sting you and there were fish with scales and wiggling eyes,’ she said, trying hard to remember. ‘My dad would put out a net and catch enough to feed us, and all of our cousins, aunts and uncles. Now just like the land, the sea is dead.’

Taranga held her baby, wrapped in hair, one last time. She took off her radiation visor, kissed him and she cried.

Finally she raised him skywards and called out to the gods to guide and protect him: ‘E ngā atua, manaakitia tā matou pepe.’

Then with a scream she cast the baby into the foaming waves. For a moment it looked as if he might fly. Hina had never forgotten that morning and, sometimes, she would close her eyes and imagine her little brother floating through the ocean, swaddled in hair, tied to his umbilicus, with his placenta charging forward, lighting up the deep dark ocean and showing Maui number 5 the way to a new home.

Ten years later, Hina was lying on her bed listening as the crescendo of brothers snoring, tossing, turning and sleep-talking
around began to thicken. Suddenly, she heard five loud and sharp knocks at the door. She heard her mother’s feet slide over the linoleum floor in a hurry to open it. Who could it be? She heard her mother gasp and begin to wail, and she smelt the stinging smell of sea. Peeking around the corner of her door, she saw a skinny boy with hair like weed. His eyes were dark. His hands and his feet were webbed. Pulling out of his mother’s grasp, he looked at her and smiled cheekily. She knew that Maui number 5 had returned and that he was not like her other brothers, that he would be her friend and they’d have many adventures together.

One day, Hina would plait the sacred rope that Maui 5 would use to snare the sun, pulling it like a fish from the darkness and flooding the world with light.

He would charm their grandmother Mahuika, so much that she would give him every single one of her magical glittery nails, each one holding a flame, and he would bring fire back into the world.

He would follow their mother to the underworld, and meet their father Makea-tu-tara.

Using the jawbone of his other grandmother, Murirangawhenua, he would fish up a new, clean land full of life, with forests and rivers and trees, and that land would become their home. More babies would be born.

His brothers would always be jealous of him, and so he would become Hina’s closest friend, but because of that love, one day he would hurt his sister so deeply that she would take her own life.