

## Briar GRACE-SMITH

### A Small Light

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 how 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.