

Behind the Face Paint

By Maggie Hansen, Year 8

People think face paint is just for show, a splash of colour. But for me, it's something deeper. It's a connection to my Māoritanga. They aren't just athletes playing some game; they are comfort to those who have none—those like me. When I paint those green, blue, and red stripes, I remember who I am—he toa ahau.

Today is the day. The dreaded, heavy day. I look in the mirror, and a smile is missing. The laughter is gone as I spread the gloopy paint over my face, by myself. A red smear is missing from my ihu. Once a vibrant color now seems drained, almost soul-sucking. My Māmā appears behind me, her hands gentle on my shoulders.

"It'll be okay, Wairua. I know it won't be the same without..." Her voice catches as she notices my face, ghostly.

The prolonged car drive is nauseating. Humid air traps me in a suffocating mirumiru. My pounamu feels like it's vibrating, heart racing out of control. The car seemed to crawl ever so slightly, though I know it didn't. I look away as if the sight is burning my eyes. Middlemore Hospital. My stomach flips as I try to forget past memories.

FLASHBACK

"Pāpā!" I shout, my voice cutting through the stiff Hospital air.

"Wairua..tāku tama. Ka pouri ahau kaore au e noho ki tōku kainga ināiane." Pāpā speaks weakly, unable to form many words. The artificial smell lingers in the air, making the moment feel just about surreal. Machines beeping steadily, everything is overwhelming, suffocating.

"He kino... Toku manawa."

I try to hold back tears, my throat raw. Had to be tough, be pakari for Dad. I know that's what he'd want.

END FLASHBACK

Go Media Stadium looms over me as my internal movie reaches the credits. Pāpā's voice echoes in my mind. The atmosphere shifts as we walk through the stadium gates, almost as if the concrete speaks. Buttery kānga pahū, greasy hotdogs, and the warm smell of cinnamon-soaked donuts fill the air. The tūru kahurangi slowly flood with superfans. Māmā flashes me a bright smile. "Want your usual?" she asks as she sets down her bag.

"I'm not hungry," I shake my head. The buzz around me quiets as if the stadium is holding its breath, awaiting the first player.

The crowd's energy warps as Tuivasa-Sheck darts out of the tunnel, his menemene twinkling. The crowd loses it, yelling for attention. It's the heartbeat of my people. Tens of thousands of people exactly like me, begging for recognition from their idol. The flags throughout the stadium signify Maori culture. Peita kanohi shining brightly, making a statement. But as Tuivasa-Sheck runs past the crowd, one voice rings a little louder, a little more desperate. It feels silly, but at that moment, it feels like he might notice me.

The game kicks off. Pass after pass, scrums, and lineouts. Earlier this year, my blood would pump. Adrenaline pulsing. But now, each pass just seems like a ball flying through the air. All enjoyment is gone; only a coarse ball is left. Wayde hurls the ball into the lineout, his boots slicing into the grime of the field.

“On your left!” Ali hollers.

His voice piercing through the stadium, whairawa with brawn.

His burly, veined waewae pushes harder with each grab, as the other players strive to catch him. The smell is overwhelmingly powerful - mud, muscle, the sting of antiseptic, and the faint trace of grease. I feel the mana with each stride he takes, getting closer to the line. My manawa races hard in my chest, hoping his victory will lift my spirits. The rough ball flew down to the ground with a satisfying thud. A small cheer leaves my body as he jumps into the air. Ali’s menemene is nearly contagious.

The Warriors start to jog off the field, their heads held high. Waiata blasts off, blaring over the speakers - the usual stadium noise. But then something shifts. A familiar melody cuts through the chaos. *Wairua*...of all the songs they could play. The song that brought my parents together, the song that grew up with me. It wraps around me like a Korowai, comforting and secure. I don’t want to believe in signs, but at this moment, I do.

Crowds of people stampede to the food stands, craving game-day junk. I get up, weaving through the masses to find my Māmā. “Wairua!” Her voice is lightning, shining across the bustle of strangers. I spot her face amidst the sea of chaos. “Wairua!” Her voice is more urgent than before. I finally catch a glimpse of her bright māwhero jacket, her pasty white skin, and her recognizable short dark makawe.

She catches my eye, and her face softens. It’s a storm of frustration and worry, or was she just glad to see me? “What were you doing? Don’t you want your slushie?” She holds up the drink, and it does look tempting, but I can’t show it on my face. “Mum, can we just go...” The words leave my mouth as I look down, almost ashamed. Whutuporo games were always a staple; an ongoing tradition with me and my pāpā.

“Come on, Wairua, it’s almost over. You love it here!” She places her hands on my shoulders, her touch not bringing its usual comfort. My eyes drift away from her. The haruru of the crowd, dimming away. It sounds as if we are underwater. I nod, though I’m uncertain. She smiles so brightly and squeezes my shoulders. “You used to get so hyped over this stuff, you and Pāpā!” I think about the face paint and Dad screaming at the TV. “I’ll be back,” I mumble, walking away. I don’t want any popcorn, not any lollies, I want Dad.

The world will keep spinning, this is just a blimp in my life. I head back over to our seats, wishing this day would just pass by. My hands fiddle with my pounamu, seeking warmth. The TVs playing slow-mo recaps were meant to be exciting, yet only the cracked concrete floor catches my eye. I try to distract myself, counting the pia ngaungau on the floor, disgustingly. The sounds seem to slow, but the crowd speeds up. Cheers and claps erupt in the stadium - the second half has started.

When I look up, the players are already on the field. They warm up, stretch, and talk tactics. The whistle blows, and the players lock in. Luke passes the pōro off to Edward. I lift my eyes from the floor just in time to see Edward catch it and take off down the field. Oneone seems to fly from the floor, indicating the hard mahi he always puts into every run he has. The opposing team tries but fails to grab his blur of a body.

His hand slams the pōro down. I'm getting ready to jump up, finally happy. But just as I do, a hand grabs my shoulder. I figure it's Mum, but the hand feels makariri and heavy. When I whip around everything slows. My lips part slowly. He's right there. My mind races, trying to connect the dots, but the lines draw to nothing. I want to say something, but my voice is caught in my throat, dry. Tears escape my eyes, but I quickly wipe them away. Pāpā has made it.

“Kei konei ahau e tama, whakaohomauri.” His voice sounds weak, as if he is pushing his vocal cords to the limits. “Pāpā, pēhea, ko te mea, he aha koe ki konei?” I want to sound strong, speaking his language; our language. His soft fingers trace the paint on my face. “Kei te mōhio au ki te nui o tene kēmu ki a koe, ā kei te mōhio au, he pouri i a koe na te mea kaore au i haere.” He chuckles to himself, trying to make light of the situation. It feels like the world around us has stopped for our moment. “I whakapono tonu ahau ki a koe Pāpā...”

The final whistle blows, signifying the end of the game. I look down at the Warriors, their faces painted with mud. The game might be over, but I now realise it's not about winning; it's about the legacy we hold, the legacies of those who fought before us, and those still fighting today. I raise my hands. Not for the win, but for everything that comes with it. “Kua taea e koe, Pāpā...” I whisper. And I finally believe it. The paint on our faces may fade, but our legacies won't.