

Taking Uncle Toby Home

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Even before I was born, my tupe was an old man. When his wife gave birth to their first child, my father, he was already forty years old. But at the age of sixty-seven, a year before my birth, my grandfather was not your average elderly man. He was off stealing bodies.

Tupe is pronounced “*too-pee*.” Derived from the Maori word for grandparent or ancestor, *tupuna* [*too-poo-nah*], this is the name by which my generation knows our grandfather and great-grandfather. One of the mokopuna¹ could not pronounce it, so we use the shortened form, *Tupe*. To me and all the rest of Gordon Ponga Kingi Davies’s descendants, *Tupe* means more than other titles like *Grandad*, *Grandpa*, or *Pop*. Our tupe is the patriarch of our extended family, our kaumatua. His name calls to our minds the soft, wrinkled face and wise eyes of a man who will be forever loved.

In 1973 my tupe’s uncle Toby passed away. Uncle Toby had spent his life working and living off the family tribal land on Great Barrier Island, a mountainous, green protrusion in the sea off the east coast of Auckland. During the last few years of his life, he had lost his sight, and in general his health had deteriorated. He had avoided leaving his home on Great Barrier Island until he could fight it no longer.

You see, those of us who have visited the “Barrier” know how much it hurts to leave. Anyone who spends even a few days there risks heartbreak on departure. The quaintness of the island charms visitors: Each house has to generate its own electricity by diesel engine. The phone system is a party line, which means no two people on the same side of the island can make a call at the same time and anyone can listen in. The few roads are not sealed, and if it rains two consecutive days, they become torrents of liquid clay that no vehicle can navigate, leaving each family isolated on its

own farm. But the land is fertile, the native forest is lush, and the coastline and cool sea are picturesque. As a child, I spent every Christmas holiday there, climbing around the rocks, hunting for crabs, walking through the bush, bathing in the water hole. It was my very own place to escape to.

This oasis from modernization has one more special attraction. Great Barrier Island, or, more specifically, Katherine Bay, is the land of my heritage. My grandfather and his father and his—right back to the chiefs of the Aotea-Ngatiwai tribe—have lived off this land. It has been good to them, and in return they stay. Even after they die, they stay.

At the time of his death, Uncle Toby's daughter Hine dictated his burial be in Auckland. Some of the family disagreed, but no one took any action. No one, that is, except my tupe.

Maybe Hine was right in thinking that a funeral and burial in Auckland would be better. The cost involved would be far less. If the body were buried locally, she would not have to hire a plane to transport it over the ocean to a sparsely inhabited island. More people could attend a service in the city. She also lived closer to his intended grave in Auckland, and she wanted to visit him often. But she did not take into consideration her father's connection with the land on the Barrier. The Maori believe in spirits living on after death, and so did she, but this she did not realize: In life, Uncle Toby's heart had always been on the island. The histories of the two, man and earth, are intertwined. She should have known that if in life he had not wanted to leave his home then surely in death he would not have rested elsewhere.

My tupe understood this. He took up his concerns with the family, but Hine was strong willed, especially in mourning, and who denies a bereaved woman her wishes? Without further discussion, Tupe set about discreetly doing what, as far as he was concerned, was his only option. He made plans to steal the body from the family and to take Uncle Toby home.

This idea was in line with family tradition: *Old Tupe*, my Tupe's father, stole his wife's body from her family when she died. He rode for two days on a horse to her family's home and asked for permission to bury his wife elsewhere. Her family, seeing this lone man and horse, thought that even with permission he had no means by which to transport a body, so they consented. That

assumption was the cornerstone of his plan. With the horse and some bushman's craftsmanship, Old Tupe managed to drag my great-grandmother's casket to the nearby beach and into a small dinghy. A larger fishing boat was waiting out of sight around the point, and in almost no time at all, he had the body in the ground on his own land. My father hasn't ever stolen any bodies. But I'll give him time—he is only forty-seven.

A Maori funeral is called a tangi. The body is kept for three days either on a marae² or in the home of the deceased person's whanau.³ Mourners come and go, giving speeches, singing songs, drinking a lot of beer in the evenings, and partying the nights away. The casket remains open, and the kuia⁴ sleep around it so the dead one does not have to sleep alone.

Uncle Toby's tangi was held at his niece's house in Penrose, Auckland, where he had been convalescing. From the minute he passed away, the rooms began to overflow with relatives and friends. When a tangi is on, no one is turned away. Beds are filled first, often with multiple sleepers. Other visitors curl up on the couches, and the majority find a space on the floor. And no one ever leaves a tangi without putting on five pounds.

The night before the funeral service, Tupe and his younger brother, Bill, put their plans to action. Another brother, Taz, and Tupe's brother-in-law Archie were also in on the scheme. Just after 3:00 A.M., my tupe rose in silence from his bed. He moved about the rooms of the house, waking the other men one by one. They had slept with enough clothes on to not have to worry about dressing in the darkness. In a corner, they stood in a circle and briefly prayed. They crept into the living room towards Uncle Toby's lifeless form. The room was warm with the regular sound of sleeping women, and condensation rolled off the windows onto the sills. Large breasts rose and fell, the women breathing a symphonic lullaby to their sleeping brother. The silent intruders stepped over and around the sleeping kuia as they made their way to the coffin in the center of the room.

I've no doubt that even in their stealth these men followed tradition and kissed their uncle good-bye. As they began to close the casket, a wakened sleeper appeared in the doorway. Uncle Bill, with spur-of-the-moment ingenuity, asked him for a screwdriver.

The sleepy-eyed relative retrieved one, helped screw down the lid, and promptly went back to bed.

One of the women asleep in the room was Tupe's cousin, Aunty Ellen. My sisters tell me she was a formidable force, the iron lady of her generation. Even the men would not cross her. While Tupe, Bill, Taz, and the rest prepared to take the body, Aunty Ellen awoke.

"What are you fullas doing?" Her voice was raspy with sleep. "Gordon, what's going on, *e boa?*"⁵

Tupe didn't need to say a word. He signaled to her that everything was okay. They were "good cuzzies," Tupe and Aunty Ellen, and she knew he was a good man. So she rolled over and did not interfere. Maybe she agreed that Uncle Toby needed to be taken home. Or maybe she obeyed only because she knew that Tupe was a stubborn man and that once he got an idea in his mind he wouldn't be stopped.

A coffin with a corpse in it is not an easy load to carry. These uncommissioned pallbearers had to take great care and effort to get it through doorways, along the hall, and down the front steps without being noticed. Either all the sleeping whanau were too drunk to be awakened, or my tupe and his conspirators were very skillful in the art of silence. Or maybe the angels were on their side. In my mind, I see the spirits of my tupuna sneaking into the rooms and putting their hands over the ears of everyone in the house so that the men could complete their task. I think they wanted Uncle Toby to join them at their resting place on the quiet island.

Outside, the air was chilled. The dew had fallen, and their footfalls made soft squelchy noises on the damp grass. A station wagon was already waiting on the road, so they loaded the casket and piled in after it. By 4:15 A.M., they had arrived at Mechanic's Bay, where a plane was waiting. It was a Grummond Goose, hired at great expense on my tupe's account, but he knew it would save difficult transportation by road when they reached the island.

Henare, the pilot, owed someone a favor and considered this a worthy cause. In the still of the damp morning, waiting for daylight before they could take off, they sang hymns. I can hear my tupe's quivering voice as he sang the words of his favorite Maori hymn, a loose translation of the hymn known in English as "How Great Thou Art":

“Whakaaria mai to ripeka ki au. Tiaho mai, ra roto i te po.” Let me know your cross. Shine to me, like day in the night.

Tupe and his brothers sang hymns to their uncle, songs of the sweetness of life and the peace of death. They sang while they waited to take Uncle Toby home.

By 5:20 A.M., the hidden sun had illuminated the sky enough for the plane to take off. The exact thoughts that went through my tupe's mind during the forty-five-minute flight, I can't say, but I do know he would have been concerned about what was going to happen after the burial. My tupe fully expected to be arrested for his actions. On the flight, he was probably wondering what his sentence would be. A fine? Time in jail? What would happen to his wife? But no matter what happened, he would not let anyone dig up Uncle Toby's body. This necessary disturbance to his rest was already too much.

Just after 6:00 A.M., the plane set down on the choppy water of Moanauriuri, a small inlet in Katherine Bay. By now the light had pushed almost all the darkness away, and as the plane neared the shore, its passengers could see the silhouettes of people on the beach—about twenty of them. These were my more distant relatives, representatives of the local tribal committee. Tupe had made prior arrangements with them, and they stood on the shore waiting to help as pallbearers and to officially welcome the dead and the visitors. Six men waded out into the salty waves to meet Tupe. Brief, but emotional, greetings were exchanged with quiet words and pressing of noses⁶ before the casket was pulled from the plane.

The wail of the kaikaranga⁷ rushed out over the water to meet the men: *“Haere mai, haere mai, haere mai.”* Welcome, I welcome you, come. With no woman to answer her call, and the men too busy with the body to reply, her voice echoed, strong but alone between the sheltering hills of the bay.

Across paddocks⁸ and along a sheep track through the bulrushes, they carried Uncle Toby, past the garden he had tended and the rubble that was all that remained of the house he had been born in. Up they marched, up to the schoolhouse where he had attended school, and then the party ascended a steep cattle trail through gorse⁹ and manuka¹⁰ to the clearing that borders the small graveyard, the graveyard where Uncle Toby had buried his own parents.

At this point, Tupe bid them all “*e nobo ra*,”¹¹ and left his brothers to run the funeral service and to put Uncle Toby into a grave that had been dug during the night. My tupe left to play the most admirable part in the whole sequence of events.

He went back to Auckland to face the wrath of the whanau. He didn’t lay low for a few days; he didn’t hide out; he didn’t even wait until the burial was completed because he wanted to go and face up to what he had done. He had not taken the body to upset anyone; he had done it because he could not allow things to happen any other way. He rushed back to his sister’s house so there would be no misunderstanding or misconstrued blame and so the inevitable hurt feelings would be as few as possible.

As he crossed the lawn, huddled groups of smoking relatives eyed him accusingly. As he opened the front door, one of them confronted him.

“What the bloody hell have you done with him!” Fury and anguish burned in the man’s eyes, and his body trembled with barely restrained violence.

This outburst aroused Hine from her wailing, and she lurched up from the position in which she had been mourning, prostrate on the floor of the living room where her father’s coffin should have been. Screaming, she rushed at Tupe, but the kuia held her back. After a volley of colorful metaphors, she was reduced to sobs. “*Toku papa. Toku papa.*” My dad, my dad.

“Why did you take him?” she cried. “You knew we wanted to keep him here with us.”

“Yes,” my tupe replied, “but you know that land was Uncle’s life. How could you think of keeping him away from the place his heart has never left?” He turned in disgust from her ignorance and entered the kitchen. There he found a policeman sitting at the table. With a resolute sigh, my tupe walked towards him as the officer rose.

“I need to ask you a few questions, mate.”

No charges were ever made. The prior arrangements Tupe had made with the tribal committee on the Barrier brought a certain level of legality to the whole matter. Eventually Hine accepted the situation as finished, though I don’t know if she ever forgave him.

The bishop who was to have presided over the funeral in Auckland didn’t even hesitate when Tupe told him what had happened;

he just asked what to do with all the flowers. And my tupe, with the same matter-of-fact attitude that had started the whole business said, "Take them to the hospital. Plenty of sick people there."

Today, Uncle Toby's body rests in the family plot on a ridge overlooking Moanauriuri. When I last visited the cemetery, a fantail¹² flitted around my husband and me, guarding our ancestors and warning us that these sleeping ones are not to be disturbed. Searching over names on headstones, I noticed one in particular, to which I drew my husband's attention:

"Uncle Toby"
Maho Kino Davies
Born December 20, 1885
Died March 8, 1973

The shadows lengthened, and a warm breeze sighed contentedly in the manuka. Our little guardian perched himself on the headstone, and I knew, with the part of me that knows sacred things, Uncle Toby was home.

Rochelle A. Fankhauser is a cowinner of the 1995 BYU Studies Personal Essay Contest.

NOTES

¹grandchildren

²at a Maori meetinghouse

³family

⁴old women

⁵friend

⁶a formal Maori greeting

⁷The *karanga* is a part of any Maori ceremony. Literally it means "call" and is almost always performed by a woman known as *kaikaranga*, "the person who calls." Usually there is at least one *kaikaranga* representing each party, and if not, a man may take her place.

⁸fields

⁹a noxious weed like briars

¹⁰a bushlike native tree

¹¹good-bye

¹²A fantail (piwakawaka) is a small, native New Zealand bird. According to Maori tradition, they are the keepers of burial grounds, watching over all who enter therein.