

Amberlea Gordon – Secondary Schools Division, 3rd Place

The White Dress

The silhouette of a small dark figure straightened against the softening darkness of the coast. The roar of blues and greys met her eyes, straining under the dim lighting. Slamming the vehicle door shut, a streak of white whirled by, out of the corner of her eye.

‘Don’t go too far, Kahu!’ She called after the little girl.

‘I won’t Nanny.’

‘That girl,’ Nanny thought to herself, ‘is like the wind. Always flying east and west. Sometimes flowing gently, other times a sudden whirlwind of colours.’

The shrivelled body slowly settled into a sitting position. Nanny frowned grumpily at the grainy earth. The sand was sticky and clammy against her leathery skin. She drew her nightgown tighter around her. Although it was cold, the corners of Nanny’s mouth twitched into a melancholy smile as she listened contently to the shimmering sound of Kahu’s laughter in the breeze.

The woman squinted to see the little girl chasing gulls along the beach, her dress fluttering behind her like a kite in the wind. Kahu had insisted on wearing her sacred dress today. Nanny thought little girls should wear vibrant dresses that fitted their slim physiques, the type that had ruffles or patterns or stitches. She could see so many dresses that would match that tumble of smooth chocolate sun-soft hair, that would bring out the ocean in those broad blue eyes. Kahu was determined to wear her plain, white dress. John, her father, had argued she would freeze if she went like that.

‘But Dad,’ Kahu groaned, like he was so silly, ‘you don’t understand! This is a dress for sea salt and sticky ice cream and happy naps on the way home.’

‘The other day you said it was a dress for picking flowers, Sunday afternoons and thunderstorms,’ Nanny had said fondly as she set John’s breakfast down.

Kahu rolled her eyes and threw her hands up in exaggeration. Nanny had to down her coffee to stop herself from laughing.

‘It’s also the dress that barely covers your knees and you’ll probably catch your death in,’ but John smiled that familiar smile and Nanny knew he didn’t mind.

A wave crashed down on the withdrawing water and showered sea spray on the wrinkled face. Nanny wiped her nose.

‘How cold Kahu must be in that dress,’ Nanny fretted.

Suddenly Nanny realized the little girl had stopped laughing. There was no patter of little feet on the sand, no flutter of white, not even a gull disturbed. Nanny quickly got to her feet. There was no Kahu to be seen. Nanny hurried down the beach, her feet barely making a dent in the sand as she frantically searched for the little girl.

Her eyes strained, fighting to find Kahu through the poor light. Nanny’s heart fluttered against her ribcage, her long snow-streaked hair falling behind her. A young woman jogged past her, staring at her oddly. Could she know where Kahu was? Nanny hurried, her feet struggling to keep up with her anticipation. The ocean air filled her lungs and she swallowed back the sob in her throat. She had told Kahu not to go far. That silly girl. Nanny’s legs gave way underneath her as she fell into the grainy sand. It was numbingly cold, clingy and she loathed the way it hindered her from finding Kahu. Nanny mumbled feverishly to herself as she slowly got to her feet.

Oh, where was that little girl in that stupid plain dress?

Nanny scanned the vast area she had covered in her hurried strides now the light was clearer. The jogger was chatting to a young man and pointing at Nanny timidly.

Why would they point at her? They should be looking for Kahu as well!

Nanny took more hurried strides and turned into a little bay, separated from the previous beach. Finding nothing that helped find her Kahu, Nanny swallowed the lump forming in her

throat. Dread welled up in her chest, tightening around her heart. Why didn't she keep an eye on her? Nanny felt a hot tear make a pathway down her cheek and drip off her quivering chin. The wind brought forth a burst of cool air that made Nanny's gown bellow behind her and her hair fly into her sticky tear-streaked face, yet Nanny didn't feel the cold. She just felt hot, red hot anger prick her skin. There was a patter of footsteps.

'Nanny?'

Nanny opened her eyes.

'Kahu?' Nanny exclaimed, her eyes finding the little form.

Kahu stood there motionless, her solemn gaze staring back at Nanny. Kahu's mouth twisted in a questioning smile above that honest, prompt chin. Her fresh rounded cheeks were flushed pink and her eyebrows formed a perfectly concerned arch.

'What's wrong?'

'Nanny!' Nanny's gaze whipped around to meet a tall figure approaching, rapidly.

She went to grab Kahu's hand, so she didn't run off again, but her fingers found only emptiness. Kahu, she was gone.

'Nanny!' the young man shouted, growing closer.

Nanny grasped the wind, her fingers still comprehending the absence of the little girl's hand.

'Nanny, what are you doing out here?'

'Who are you?' Nanny said, her eyes clouded over as she scanned the beach for Kahu.

'Nick! I'm your grandson.' His face twisted in frustration and hurt. Nanny stared at him.

'Nick?'

‘Yes, what are you doing out here? Everyone’s looking for you,’ he said, clearly irritated.

‘Nick,’ Nanny said slowly, the word tasting strange. ‘I was looking for Kahu. She was just here; did you see where she went?’

Nanny could read from his expression that he was straining for patience.

‘Nanny,’ he said slowly, ‘Nanny, Kahu has been gone a long time.’

‘No, you must be mistaken. She hasn’t been missing very long at all. I’m sorry Nick, I think you’re confused. Kahu isn’t a common name but we might be-’

‘Nanny, Kahu has been gone for seven years. She slipped down some rocks and drowned in the sea. I know this is hard, but it’s cold out here. You need to get dressed properly. Mum and Dad are searching for you. Come on, I’ll drive you home, okay?’

Nick led her down the beach, silently. Nanny paused for a moment, thinking she could still hear the little girl’s laughter carried by the wind. But it was only the ocean and the waves lapping against the beach.