

*Taking McCahon* by Tina Shaw

There are people he knows in here. It's a bit like living down in the valley, only there's no girls, and you can't get out whenever you feel like it. No trips to town boozing with your mates, screaming down out of the mountains, and going full bore down the straight. No smoking weed by the lake. No watching the moon come up over the water; sweet. Other than that, it's not too bad in the joint. Food's all right – better than back home. There are movie nights, and a woodworking shop. The older guys look out for him. *Whatcha in for, kid?* They laugh when he tells them.

They took him along cause he had the skills. Better to do something like this, than burglarising the houses down in the valley. That's what Te Kaha said. Bumping along in the van, cab filled with smoke, taking care on the corners, the winding road was icy - only one road in one road out, that's Te Urewera. The boy lit a smoke off the last one and watched the black bush skeeting past outside the window. Te Kaha, with his full face moko, driving and talking. We're not after revenge, he was saying, we're an *ope taua*, a compensation party. You'd heard it all before, lotsa times, but still you listened, cause Te Kaha's the man.

Pulling up at the DOC building, all was quiet. The ranger'd be asleep. But the kid knew, there'd be an alarm - you're in then you're out, quick fast. It wasn't like doing over a house. People round here didn't run to alarms. Sometimes he'd make himself a sandwich. One place, he fried a steak. Mostly he just took stuff he could use. CDs, smokes, booze, cash. Not interested in stuff you had to get rid of. Once, took a bracelet for a girl he was seeing, Esmeralda from over the way, her folks got a place up near the marae. Only fourteen, but tall

and smart. There was talk of her being sent down to the city one day to go to varsity, her people were saving money for that. A pretty bracelet of silver and shimmering blue stones, it reminded him of the small secret lake he'd found one day up in the hills, shining bluer than a thrush's egg, hidden in the dark bush. That's Te Urewera for you - full of secrets.

They went round the back carrying the ladder, along with the other fella who'd been following in the car. Te Kaha had a crowbar. Get in then you're out, quick fast. He could've done it quieter, but no, it was over real sudden, using the crowbar, and of course the bloody alarm went off. It made him shiver. He wasn't used to hard ringing alarms. He was used to walking quietly round the backs of houses and letting himself in with a hunting knife.

So they got inside. Moving fast now. There was the painting. But there were three, not just one. And so big. So full of shadows. It freaked him out. But they were working quick fast now to get the paintings off the wall before the ranger came. It wasn't that hard: the pictures were just stuck onto the wall with staples.

Sitting in the lounge with the others, he sees the paintings one day on the TV. It's been a while since they took them, but here's a story showing what they did. Mostly it's about Te Kaha. There's a skinny kid who's supposed to be him (though maybe he's not so skinny any more) – the older guys point and laugh. And there's a lot about the paintings. How the gallery people fixed them up after they got them back. How much they're worth (heaps). About the famous white guy who painted them. The white man's treasure, is what Te Kaha had called it.

He leans forward, looking, wishing the other guys would shut the fuck up.

They're not what you'd think paintings would be like. His mum has got a painting of a stag done on black velvet. It's not like that. Esmeralda's folks have got a picture of a blue house in a yellow paddock. It's not like that. One house he went into had a picture of Jesus

Christ pointing at his bleeding heart (that was freaky, like the guy was looking at him).

Another house, sunflowers like you'd draw if you'd been smoking weed.

It's hard to say what the paintings are like. You look but they don't make much sense.

But there are big spaces in the painting you might fall into if you aren't careful. There are colours that make you think. One colour in particular – a bruised yellow like the sky over the lake before a storm – makes him think of his secret lake, the little one, hidden up in the bush, the one the tourists don't know about.

They got the paintings off the wall and rolled them up, quick fast. Then they chucked them in the back of the van and took off. The guy in the car took off. He and Te Kaha following behind the car. Driving fast, though still taking care on the icy bends. Te Kaha laughing. *We done it, man.* Yeah, he thought, but would they get away with it? He looked back into the van interior, where the big rolls were laid, moving with the bends, and remembered the freaky feeling before they'd rolled them up. Like being touched by a ghost. Not that he believed that kind of crap. A house he'd got into one afternoon, people said it was haunted, a man had died there, been murdered in his bed, that's what people had said, the man's head bashed in as he lay sleeping in his bed. But who cares. He got in anyway, walking round the back and opening the door with his knife. Inside he was thinking, So this is a haunted house. There were leaves on the floor, and grass growing up inside the front windows, and the sound of your boots loud on the wood floor. It was like you were still outside, looking in, when you were inside instead. That was all. No big deal. Though he didn't hang round. Not that he was scared, no way. But there was nothing to take anyway, not even any cans in the cupboards, so he left.

The black bush skeeting past outside. It was way early now, maybe about four. The

car had got ahead, so he couldn't see the red tail lights any more winking in the dark. They were going more slowly, Te Kaha careful with the van on the icy bends. Driving through the night, it was soothing, like they hadn't done anything at all, were just going to the pub (at four in the morning). Then there were lights up ahead. They were coming into the township.

*Fuck*, said Te Kaha. Lights, people, up ahead. It was a road block.

He likes the woodworking shop. And the guys don't tease him in there, they leave him alone. Working with the planes and the skillsaw and the drill. You can make a thing you can look at and think, I made that. A thing that's got clean angles and sharp edges, that holds together good, and has a purpose. The guy who looks a bit like his old man teaches him about angles, drawing little pictures on a piece of paper, showing how they work. Yeah, he likes that. One day he makes a frame for a picture, using what he knows about angles, then spends a lot of time sanding it back. He props it against the wall when he's finished, to look at it. It's just an empty frame, but you can see how a picture would look nice inside it. He thinks of a certain kind of yellow, bruised like the sky before a storm. He thinks of the time he and Esmeralda walked up through the bush to that other lake (lotsa water in Te Urewera) and rowed across to the little island, sound of the oars loud across the water, and how they'd climbed the ladder on the island up to the other, tiny lake – lake, island, lake, like it's a puzzle. A puzzle you aren't expected to solve. *It's paradise*, said Esmeralda. Like, he didn't know already?

When they got to the road block all sorts of people were there, waving spades and things, looking angry, and how'd they get out here so fast? Four in the fucken morning. What'd they do, wake the whole town up? He hunched down in his seat, not wanting to see them, not wanting to be seen, usually he wasn't ever seen, thinking he might get hurt, beaten, thrown in

jail. A DOC jeep over to one side, man with a walkie talkie. Only reason there weren't any cops, they couldn't get into the mountains that fast. Te Kaha had slowed right down. Inching along. Faces on both sides of the van, banging on the sides. DOC man coming towards the van. Bastard might even have a gun. He hunched down, put his hand up to his cap, feeling small like the times he went to the city. Pulled his cap down. Te Kaha, though, he was leaning out the window talking to people. *Hey bro. You, what's up. Hey, cuz.* Hunched down, looking out only with sideways glances, but he could see the people starting to pull back. He recognised a couple of them now. People he knew. Then the van was through, past the DOC guy, then going past the dark wooden houses, one he knew from last month when he took a bunch of CDs from there but they turned out to be crap so he dumped the lot in the bush. Picking up speed and going up the hill, leaving the town behind. Te Kaha grinning, *All right boy?* He lit a smoke, and nodded.

Colin McCahon is sitting in his cell. It's late and he's been asleep – he knows this cause Slug is into the wheezy snoring he does before dawn. But the white painter dude is sitting in his cell like he's dropped in for a chat. Legs crossed, shirt sleeves rolled up, rollie smouldering between his fingers.

*Whatchu want?* Can't hardly get the words out, his teeth are chattering that hard. Slug grunts and rolls over in his sleep.

What's it supposed to mean?

But the white dude doesn't say a thing, doesn't even look over. It's like he's sitting somewhere by himself, having a quiet smoke and a think. From not far away comes the sound of footsteps, a guard making his rounds. There's something he wants to ask the white fella, something at the back of his mind, but what is it?

Later, though, standing in line to get his baked beans and toast, he feels different about it. Doesn't mean a thing. Just a weird dream.

His old man comes to see him and they sit in the room with the other guys who've got family come to visit. Tables and chairs and a cup of coffee or tea for the visitor, just like you're in a hospital or something. Even his old man seems to think so. 'Getting better?' he asks. 'They gonna let you out soon, eh boy.'

His old man with stubbled cheeks, salt and pepper, wearing a skungy old tee-shirt, what he'd wear round the house, stained trou, just like he was sitting at home in the old armchair in front of the TV drinking from a can of beer and squinting at the *Best Bets* while the ads are on and the smell of roasting meat coming from the kitchen, maybe a bit of pig one of his brothers might've got up in the bush, or maybe something that'd fallen off the back of a truck. His old man, he's been in this place too, a few years back. And now here *he* is, sitting in the big house, doing his time, just like the old man.

The old man wipes spit away from his mouth, talking through his chipped teeth. 'I hear that Te Kaha fella's up in the city with that rich sheila, you know the one, a billionaire they say, her with the helicopter.' He could've at least put on a clean tee-shirt. 'She's taken him over to France with her, for her birthday.'

'She what?'

'It's her birthday, and she's taken that Te Kaha bugger over to France, gone first class, so I read in the paper, him and her.' The old man licks his stubbled lips. 'It'll be champagne and caviar for that bugger, that's what they say.' His old man slumps in the plastic chair, tired already, but then he would have got up early to get here, driving down out of the mountains. 'Look at him now, poodle with a moko, that fella.'

But he doesn't want to talk about all that, about what happened after they took the painting, about Te Kaha drinking champagne. He looks at his old man – he must've been young once, too, he just doesn't look it. His old man walking round the backs of houses and getting in with a knife.

'You get a postcard from that bugger?' he says, with a wily look.

Why's he keep on about that, like he's winding you up? Wants to tell him to shut the fuck up. Except you can't cause it's the old man.

'Been making some plans,' he tells the old man, 'for when I get out of here.'

'Yeah?' The old man squinting like he wants a smoke, like he hasn't even heard.

'Yeah,' he says, and he means it. Not sure for how long, but right now he means it.

'Gonna do something with myself.'

The old man coughs, once, delicately. 'That's good, son.' His watery brown gaze shifts to the door, and you can tell he wants a smoke. 'It's good to have a goal in life.' But the words come out absentminded, and the old man's looking over at the door and the guard who's standing there. Maybe he's remembering his own time here, his family visits. Or maybe not. He looks back at the boy. 'So anyway, son. Keep out of trouble, eh. You'll be back home soon. Just like nothing happened.'