

Holiday Mahi

by André Ngāpō



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I jump up as fast as I can. But Tyson wins, as usual.

“Champion!” he cries, raising his arms before I’m even half-done.

At breakfast, Uncle says, “You kids are going to help us in the māra kai today.”

“What’s a māra kai?” I ask.

“The kai gardens,” replies Uncle, “where we grow all the food.”

“Yes,” says Aunty, “and today, you can help pick asparagus.”

Picking asparagus? Working on the first day of the holidays!

Uncle and Aunty run a market garden. Yesterday, when I saw the land for the first time, I felt excited. It looked like a fun place to explore. But now they just want me to do mahi.

Tyson looks at me, and his eyes narrow. “Bet I can fill up a tray of asparagus faster than you,” he says.

We head out into the fields, and Aunty shows me how to use the curved knife to cut the asparagus. “Try to cut it here, like this,” she says, “nice and clean.”



It looks easy, but when I try it, the asparagus snaps.

“Don’t worry, we can cut it again,” Aunty says. “You’ll work out how to do it. Just keep trying.”

After five minutes, I want to give up. I can’t do it right, and my back’s real sore.

When Aunty leaves, Tyson looks at me and laughs. “I’m gonna beat you easy!” he boasts.

At morning tea, I’m too grumpy to eat. Tyson’s been hassling me all morning.

“Right,” Uncle says after he’s finished his sandwich, “I’m going to get the tractor and pull up the potatoes.”

The tractor! “Can I have a ride please, Uncle?” I ask.

“No,” he replies, shaking his head. “You and Tyson need to keep picking asparagus.”

“I don’t even like asparagus,” I think.

All week, we do mahi before lunch. And even though I get better at picking asparagus, I never beat Tyson, no matter how hard I try.

One day, we make up cardboard boxes for the fruit and vegies. Another day, we pack kai in the giant fridge. Then we clean the floor of the packing shed with the water blaster.

Some of the jobs are fun, but Tyson teases me endlessly about how slow I am and how he always wins.

“I’m sick of all this mahi,” I think. But at least Uncle and Aunty have given us the weekend off!



On Friday night, I wake up and hear Uncle and Aunty in the kitchen.

“Oh,” says Aunty. “I just got a message. Two of our workers can’t make it tomorrow.”

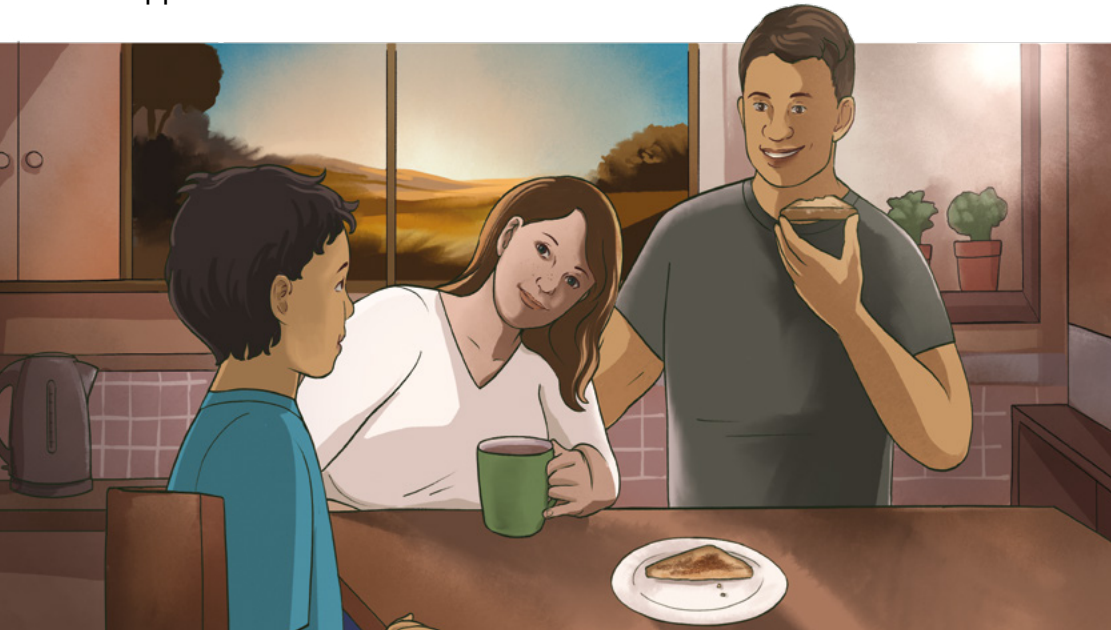
“Well, looks like we can’t have a day off then,” Uncle replies. “The fruit will go rotten. And we need the money to pay the bills.” He sounds stressed.

I slip back into bed and wonder how I can help. “I’ll do mahi tomorrow,” I think even though I’m tired.

In the morning, I wake to the sounds of Aunty and Uncle getting ready for the day’s work. I get up, make my bed, and get dressed. It must be early. Tyson doesn’t even stir.

“Morning,” I say to Aunty and Uncle. “Can I help you in the māra kai today?”

“But you’ve been working so hard,” says Aunty. “And you’re supposed to have the weekend off.”



“I don’t mind,” I reply. “I want to help.”

“Well,” says Uncle, “some of the workers are away this weekend, and we do need extra pickers.”

Tyson comes into the kitchen and stares at me, already dressed. “Are we working today?” he asks.

“It will be a big help,” replies Uncle.

It’s decided. As we walk out to the ute after breakfast, Tyson whispers. “Ka pai! Another chance to beat you in the māra kai.”



We pile into Uncle’s ute and soon pull up beside a big field covered in plants. As I get out, my eyes almost pop out. Strawberries!

“So, boys,” says Uncle. “The rule is that you can have a few strawberries at the end of each row.”

“Yes!” I say. Strawberries are way better than asparagus.

“But,” says Aunty, “save the best ones for the shop.”

Aunty and Uncle show us the ones we can eat. The not-quite-perfect ones. But still yummy!

“I’ll also pay you for every bucket you pick,” says Uncle. “But only for the good ones.”

“And,” adds Aunty, “if you do a good job, we’ll get takeaways tonight.”

“I’m gonna be the champ again,” Tyson murmurs.

We walk into the field and get to work. As we reach the end of each row, I see Tyson munching on strawberries. He’s eating the biggest, juiciest, and most-perfect-looking ones.

I look at the strawberries, and I remember the competition. But I don’t care about it or the money. I just want to help Uncle and Aunty.

The sun feels nice and warm on my back, and I enjoy the songs on the radio as we pick. When it’s time to finish, I hear a groan. Tyson is at the end of the row, rubbing his tummy. Uncle is squatting beside him.

“Oh, my puku,” he moans. “It hurts.” He looks green, but he says he’ll be OK.



“I think Tyson tried to win the competition for eating the most,” says Uncle, grinning.

“And, Api,” he says, “you’ve picked heaps!”

It’s true. I’ve picked nearly as many as the adults. I look at Tyson’s buckets. He’s hardly picked any. And for a second, I think about teasing him. But I don’t.

“Let’s put our buckets together,” I tell Tyson. “We can use the money to help pay for the takeaways.”

“That’s nice of you to offer,” says Aunty. “But it’s OK. We all had a good day in the field. We all deserve takeaways.”

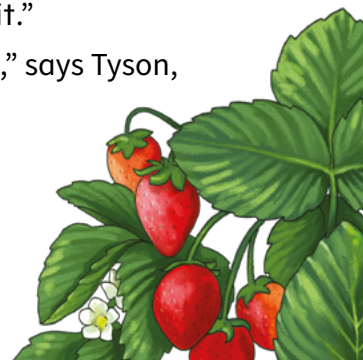
“Except for me,” says Tyson. “I don’t want to eat anything. It serves me right, I guess!”

That night, as we eat our takeaways, Aunty makes an announcement. “Tomorrow,” she says with a smile, “we’ll all have the day off!”

“And you can both ride on the tractor,” says Uncle. “You’ve earned it.”

“Especially you, champ,” says Tyson, smiling.

illustrations by
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Published 2023 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

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Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77690 964 3 (online)

ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

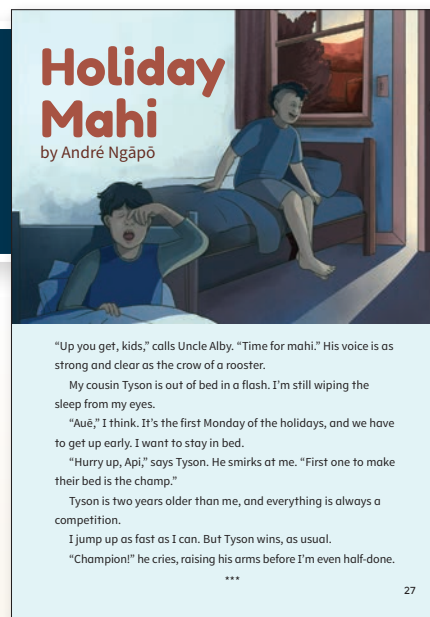
Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū

Editor: Sarah Wilson

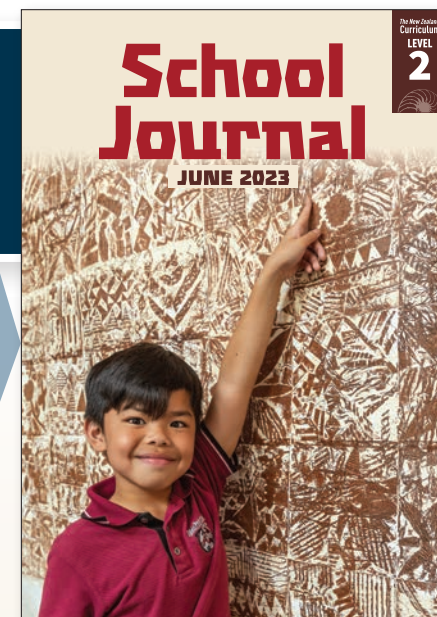
Designer: Kylee Jones

Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop

Consulting Editors: Helen Pearse-Otene, Emeli Sione, and Lisa Fuemana



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SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 2 JUNE 2023

Curriculum learning areas

English
Health and PE

Reading year level

Year 4

Keywords

competition, family, helping, mahi, māra kai, relationships, resilience, rivalry, teamwork, whānau, work