

*the sky people*



Patricia Grace

author of *Cousins*

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*For*  
*Irihapeti Ramsden and Ron Te Kawa*

*And in memory of*  
*Metapere McGill and Harata Solomon*

'Who are the Sky People? The Haurangi, the  
Wairangi, the Porangi—those crazy from the wind or  
what they breathe, those crazy from the water or what  
they drink, those crazy from darkness or depression. I  
know someone who is all three.'

(In conversation with Keri Kaa)





When Maui booby-trapped Sun then clobbered him over the head with a hunk of bone shaped like two parts of a bootmaker's last, he won, for all time, high praise as the pioneer of daylight saving.

It was a surprise attack.

It was a violent act.

During the beating, which was resolute and prolonged, Sun lost some of his marbles, most of which went skittering out to stardom. Some, however, dropped to Earth, who caught them tidily, although she didn't really want them because she understood that these pretty things could be dangerous. But she was stuck with them. She couldn't send them back because Gravity was so lopsided, so she hid them deep in her pockets.

Earth had an instinct for hiding things. In the early days when she and Sky were close together, hiddenness had been a way of life. Everything had been hidden between these two. Light could not penetrate and there was no room to swing a cat's ancestor.

There was no 'above' and 'below' in those days. No direction was different from any other — no 'vertical', 'horizontal' or 'diagonal' as Earth and Sky rolled together in each other's arms. Or alternatively, every position was above or below, every direction was north, south, east and west, every angle was vertical, horizontal or diagonal. But there was no superiority and Challenge had not been born, even though there was an inkling of it in the minds of some of Earth and Sky's children. There was the potential.

Parents speak to each other in double language, spell out secrets so that children will not understand what they are talking about. But children get an inkling, if not of the content of the secret, then at least of the idea that there is a secret, something to be discovered, to be gleaned from whisperings if they keep on listening in the dark, keep adding one little piece of nothingness to another.

Earth and Sky were born out of Darkness and therefore knew about Light, and this was the secret they wanted to keep to themselves so that their children would remain children, keep their innocence and stay with them forever.

But the children were patient listeners, and blind, innocent and squashed between their ever-embracing parents as they were, they got to talking. The listeners and decoders of secret language among them had worked out that there was something else. There was something being kept from them by their parents and they would not be satisfied until they found out what it was. It was to do with otherness, other realms, the other side. It was when the children first talked to each other about these matters that Dissatisfaction was first expressed, but not clearly expressed and not clearly understood.

What came out of the discussion was that there was a desire by most of the children to have greater understanding. If they were to have greater understanding, then their known world had to be changed.

They had to get outside of it somehow, but they were bound on all sides by the locked bodies of their parents. They were squashed and breathless and realised they would have to separate their parents if they were to become free. How were they to do this from their position of powerlessness?

There were Plants, but none of them were upright and were only as vines creeping about in the dark. There was Water, but it was stagnated and lifeless. There was Wind, but it was only as

stale breath. Conflict, being a metaphor for People, was only the beginnings of an idea.

So the offspring of Sky and Earth began trying to move the parents away from each other, pushing, pulling, prising, but were not successful until Plant Life stopped creeping about, tried standing, then just kept on doing what it normally did — that is, grow — but from a different perspective. That's when Perspective and Direction began to be understood. After some eras Sky was lifted off Earth by upwardly mobile Plant Life and the children found out about Light.

Wind had been the dissenter from all this, and after the big event became angry with all those who had had anything to do with separating his mother and father. So he called up northerlies, southerlies, easterlies, westerlies, nor'westers, sou'easters, storms, hurricanes and tornadoes — and stirred up chaos amongst Plants and Waters and the Creatures who, now that there was Light and Space, had been released among them.

It was while Wind was having his tantrums that Earth realised that some of her kids needed protection against others, and she did her best to hide some of the less protected ones until it was safe for them to come out again. She had fought long and hard against being separated from Sky, but now that it was done she was determined to make the best of the situation.

Well, all this Light. All this Space. It was almost too much of a good thing. Plants and Creatures spread everywhere. Water became seas, lakes and rivers, and became inhabited by Swimmers. Eventually People made an appearance, but this didn't happen without a great deal of trauma, which included incest, personality change, family break-up and solo parenthood.

In spite of all this Earth and Sky did the best they could to be good providers. They tried to take an interest in what was happening.

When the latest addition came along, these People, Earth



and Sky were fascinated and pleased and thought that living apart and allowing Light and Space had some compensations after all. In fact they indulged these latest offspring, gave them free rein, but soon found that the more they were given the more they wanted.

These Johnny-come-latelies reckoned life would be better if they had a bit more daytime, even though they were told they should be grateful for what they had. In the olden days their ancestors had had no daylight at all. This kind of talk fell on deaf ears.

Anyhow, Maui was the one who took up the cause on People's behalf. Maui was a foundling, who in his formative years hadn't known his true parentage; and he was born ugly, which didn't help matters. But to offset these seeming disadvantages he was of impeccable stock and had a mother who saw opportunities and was prepared to give him up at birth in order that his gifts be allowed to develop. Also he was part human — a combination of Worldly and Other Worldly — so it was appropriate that he should be the one to act as a go-between for People.

In taking up the challenge to lengthen daylight he beat up Sun so badly that Sun hobbled about like an old koroua and from then on took many hours to travel across the face of Sky.

And that was when Earth, seeing the beating handed out to Sun, hid Sun's marbles away because she knew instinctively that they would be dangerous in the wrong hands. She knew that these latest, very demanding offspring were not mature enough to take responsibility for them.

Later on, this same Maui, who must have learned Irresponsibility from the human side of his genealogy, went to get Fire for his earthly cousins. Because of the immature way he handled the situation, Fire had to be sent to hide in the bodies of trees so that Maui and these earthlings wouldn't play fast and loose with it.

Anyway, these Teina, younger sisters and brothers of Winds, Waters, Plants, Animals, Birds, Insects, Reptiles and Fish, were really too big for their boots. Upstarts. In many ways they took after Maui, being Potiki, last born. Like Maui they had outsized attitude problems and didn't care what happened or who got hurt as long as they got their own way.

These ones had no idea of how to look after their own best interests either, and without the approval of those more mature and knowledgeable than themselves, began to change the order of things.

They began to kill their Tuakana — that is, their older brothers and sisters — without good reason, and to destroy their living places. The more powerful ones among them stole food and took over the living places of the less powerful ones of their own tribe too.

And they weren't satisfied with that. They'd heard about Sun's marbles and that Earth had hidden them somewhere. They knew they'd never be happy until they found them, and they began to search. They made great holes all over Earth, shifting or destroying Plants and Animals as well as the powerless members of their own tribe.

At last they found Sun's marbles in Earth's deepest pockets and with these they made objects in their own likeness — that is, they made objects capable of enormous destruction that were not able to be properly controlled. During the making of these objects there was so much waste that many of their own tribe had to be shifted away from their homes to make room for it, many had to run in fear of it. Many had nowhere to go and had to live with it. They became ill and maimed, gave birth to sick children, died painfully.

Sun could do nothing on the day when he rose, unaware, and was straightjacketed by Maui's snare. And when that bone came cracking down on him, chipping off bits, he could only

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hold tight and hope his days weren't ended.

Sky is no butterfingers and was deft in gathering in Sun's marbles, and though it was no accident that he allowed a few to go Earthward, he later came to regret this.

It was instinct that caused Earth to tuck these bright things away. Neither she nor Sky realised at the time that their children could become their enemies, or that they themselves could be enslaved. They were indulgent parents inclined to put unacceptable behaviour down to teething problems, hyperactivity, high intelligence or precocity.

But later they began to ask themselves where they'd gone wrong. Was it because of their separation that these children had become so grasping, so out of control? Had Sky been too distant? Had Earth been too over-compensating? What could they have done about it anyway? Was it all a question of Light?

## *Flower Girls*