

Tremain's story..





OUR FAMILY LIVED THE  
ONCE WERE WARRIORS LIFE

AT LEAST IN THE FILM JAKE WOULD TRY TO  
MAKE UP THE NEXT DAY.

MY FATHER WOULDN'T.

He'd go ahead and hurt our mother harder. His violence knew no bounds. His anger never settled. He'd do whatever it took to hurt us children – punch us with fists, smash us with bottles, kick us, whack us with sticks or belts. He'd beat the living daylight out of us – not for anything.

We'd run as fast as we could if he was in the house, but he'd lock the back door – so we'd head for the windows. We were like a hen pen full of little chickens trying to get out.

We all knew the story – “run faster than Dad, get away and don't come home till someone comes and gets you”.

As a primary school-age child I discovered that the safest place was being under the bed, clinging to the wire wove. Those beds had a diagonal cross of wire wove supporting the wire mesh, and you could grab that and pull yourself up. No one could see you if they looked under the bed, and they couldn't hit you if they put a broom under the bed.

We'd sleep in the bed with our mother because we'd feel safe then. Mum would lock the door, and put knives in round the handle so that if the door opened inwards you'd have to break the knives or the wood. My father could scream all he wanted, all night, but he wasn't going to get in.

One night he came back home from drinking with the neighbours and my mother said to us, “Don't move, don't say anything, he can't get in”. Next minute he started swearing and said, “I'm going to cut the throat out of my daughter and stick her guts up on the old pine tree. He had my little sister, who had also been at the neighbours.

My mother had no choice but to open the door. He started to punch her full-on in the face. He picked up a knife. I kicked him and grabbed him around the head. My little brother tackled him around his legs and he fell to the ground.

My mother ran off, and all the other kids. But my brother and I didn't quite make it out of the house. He caught us and he stuck my little brother through the bottom pane of glass on our three-paned front door, and threw me through the middle one. My mother came back because we were lying in a pool of blood. He attacked her again and stuck her through the glass of the little porch outside the front door.

God bless these Pakeha people who lived five houses away – Patrick, who was at high school, and his sister, who was a teacher. Patrick could hear all the kids screaming, and he ran down there and grabbed my father and wrestled him to the ground. His sister came running down and took us all to hospital. I had a big cut. I've still got scars on my stomach from that night.

WE ALL CARRY OUR SCARS  
FROM OUR FATHER

One day my little sister was outside the front door, and she turned round and told him what she thought. She would have been five. He picked up a big pot planter and stuck it through the window and dropped it on her head, split her head in two. Another time he ran over my baby brother in the car.

Apart from Patrick and his sister, we were all cousins in our street and no one was going to say anything to my father. Nobody put their hand up to say “it's not okay, you are killing your family”. We felt that nobody cared. There was no Women's Refuge then. The police came, and he told them “you come on to my property and I'm going to kill you”. And they wouldn't. We did see social workers – and it was because of one of them that we were finally able to get away.

My parents were both born on the dirt floors of their tribal whare. My father was born in 1925 and my mother was a year younger. They met at a rugby game at a little place called Te Poi, at the base of the Kaimai Hills on the Waikato side. My mother was a person of nobility, from Te Arawa. She was what they call a puhi, the special one of their tribe. My father was playing this rugby game and she was with her old kuia. He smiled, she smiled, and next minute they were both smiling. He was 16, and she was 15.

My mother's parents had died when she was 12. She and her younger brother and sister all got whangai-ed out to different family members. She didn't see her sister for another 40 years, and she didn't see her brother again because he died of hepatitis after being made to dive in a culvert to get contaminated seafood when he was 14.

So my mother was always dragged around, and when my father came along she had an opportunity to feel a bit of freedom and she went for it. She was pregnant when my father took her away from her tribe back to his tribe.

My father's father was the role model for how he acted.

MY GRANDFATHER WAS  
A VERY VIOLENT MAN.  
HE BEAT THE LIVING  
DAYLIGHTS OUT OF MY  
FATHER AND  
HIS SIBLINGS.

He was a rich man. He grew big market gardens and sold watermelons at racing tracks all around the Bay of Plenty.

He was very spiteful to my father and mother. Their first child was a girl who was a blue baby with the hole in the heart. One day, after working in the fields all day for my grandfather, my mother said to him, "I need some money to go get some nappies or some milk for my baby". He told her, "Don't you come around here asking for money". So my father, who was his oldest son and carried the mana, drove my grandfather's brand new truck into the river – to defy him. They never got back together after that falling out. My parents just went and they lived in the bush, and they had a child just about every year.

I am one of 13 children, and if you include whangai (adopted children) I am one of 17. So there were 14 ahead of me, counting them. My parents were in their forties when they had me.

I have two brothers – one older and one younger. My parents had seven girls before my older brother was born, so my brother was the apple of my father's eye. He was the person who got handed down all the mana and the land.



My younger brother was the baby of the family, and everyone would pull together to honour him and make sure he got everything he wanted, because he was the baby.

If you were in the middle you got nothing. That's what happened to me. My father used to say to me "you are nothing, you get nothing". If I went ahead to make a name for myself or do something for myself, it was always "why are you trying to beat your brother?" If I was too selfish, it was "why don't you share with your younger brother?" I could never be me.

THIS FEELING OF NOT BEING  
QUITE ACCEPTED WAS MADE  
WORSE BY THE FACT THAT WHEN  
I WAS THREE YEARS OLD,  
MY FATHER LEFT ME OUTSIDE  
A SHOP IN PONSONBY  
AND NEVER CAME BACK FOR ME.

I got put into the Star of the Sea convent and I stayed there for five years – so I know how to say my Hail Marys. If you were naughty you used to go up in front of a man – I called him God – a bishop or something. My mother was Catholic but she became a Mormon, and my father was a Mormon. Finally they found out who my family were. My older brother hadn't wanted to leave me, and I think it was through him that I got found eventually.

It's hard for me to explain but my father lived in another world, a Maori world where ghosts were very real. He was one of the only people who could claim heritage to being a pure-blooded Maori. He was at home in the bush, in the swamp. He lived that old Maori way. He never went to school, and he only spoke pidgin English.



He would be considered a rare treasure now because he knew everything. He'd take me right across the Kaimai Ranges, eeling in different holes that had been there for hundreds of years. He knew the hand clasps when you were climbing up cliffs, where to build shelter, where to find the certain tree to light your fire in. He knew this all through the old chants. And when he got drunk he would sit at our kitchen table, and for hours on end he would recite all these Maori chants.

The only time I saw him happy was when my little brother and I found him in the kitchen early one morning in one of his chanting trances. Unfortunately for us he came out of the trance and beat me and my brother up. He made my brother dance and drink a flagon of port till he was drunk. He was eight and I was ten. I was sitting down on the floor, not allowed to move.

My father would have been all right if they had left him alone and not tried to assimilate him. But in the 1950s the Government relocated rural Maori from their marae into state houses in town. My parents were shifted into a suburb in the heart of Tauranga. My father didn't know how to live in a house. He spent most of his time in the bush – or in jail.

When he did work, he worked for the Ministry of Works as a roller driver on roads. Every payday he'd get drunk and bring home all his friends – a lot of strange men, just like in *Once Were Warriors*.

I SHUDDER AT WHAT MY  
SISTERS WENT THROUGH  
AT THE HANDS OF OUR  
SO-CALLED UNCLAS.

I know that some were sexually abused by them – just like the girl was in *Once Were Warriors*.

The Family Benefit was the only help my mother had. We went to school with flax sandals and had flax kete while everyone else had the little brown satchels and Roman sandals, and our lunch was wrapped in newspaper. I think “wow that's neat” now, my Mum was such a good weaver. But back then it was a shameful thing. It was because when my father went to work, he'd disappear on pay day and then come back drunk with his mates.

My father came from a very distinguished tribe called Ngati Pukenga, who are famous in Maoridom for use of guerrilla tactics during inter-tribal warfare. All throughout his life he fronted up to people – you're going to win or I'm going to win. For him there was no ref. He wasn't going to stop because someone was knocked out, he'd keep going till they were damn near dead.

In the late sixties, if you walked into the pub and turned a glass upside down you were going to fight the person whose glass you turned down. If you turned a jug upside down you were going to fight the whole pub. My father would turn down jugs on every table he walked past. They called him ‘The Bantam’ because he was small, but he was famously hard to knock out.

Because of a wonderful social worker, a man called Keith, we found a chance of getting away from my father. Four of my sisters were taken away from Mum and Dad and put into foster care. And the two older than me got sent to a place in Hamilton called Day Street – where the supposedly bad girls got sent, like borstal.

Later, my mother and my older sisters found an escape through the Labour Department, which paid the airfares and accommodation for people wanting to work for farmers who were growing tobacco around Motueka. They just took off one day. Keith must have known about it, but it was kept from my father. For my mother, it was the pond she could rest quietly in.

SHE FINALLY MET ANOTHER  
PARTNER AND ENJOYED  
A NORMAL, HAPPY LIFE.

When my mother first came down here, I was left up north with my two younger sisters. Then my father was sent to jail for six months, and we were left to fend for ourselves at home – trying to survive with no money, no power, no nothing. I'd go and steal Weetbix and milk from shops or from people's houses while they were asleep. I was still at intermediate school. We were very superstitious, very scared. It was frightening to be left like that as kids.

**WHERE WAS ANYONE?**

**WHERE WERE OUR NEIGHBOURS?**

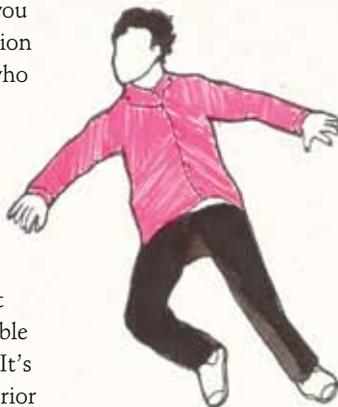
**THEY DID NOTHING.**

After my father came out of jail, he was just the same as before. At 13 I'd had enough – and this time I thought, I'm going to get you before you get us... That's what triggered me off, and I got up behind my father with a piece of four by two and whacked him round his head. And didn't want to stop. I got to the point where you don't care whether you live or die, you're just going to do it. Everything went red in front of me. It's like vertical blinds. You see the whole picture, but you can't quite see the full picture. As your anger builds up, the slats start to close and everything turns red and the picture disappears. You are not in the real world. It's red – violent – like a blood lust.

I'm not sure if it's my Maori upbringing, but it's feelings you imagine when you are in the full throes of a haka and you give it a million percent of who you are. It becomes a point of ecstasy really, where killing is just the honourable thing to do. It's that old warrior mentality. Every Polynesian culture has it, but some have just adjusted a lot sooner.

I was dragged off my father by neighbours across the road. And then Keith sent me down here to join my mother. I did the last year of intermediate and then went to Motueka High School till the fourth form, and left at 15.

I had so much anger built up in me – I couldn't just have a wash and wash it off. I did everything that was wrong just to stand out. I knew I was rebelling. I got sent to borstal for stealing.



After that, I learnt I was hard to knock out – like my father – and I started fighting policemen just to see if I could beat them. I have seven charges of police assault against me. I was sent to borstal again because I was too young to go to youth prison.

I got released from borstal in Invercargill, and that's when I met my partner – I was 17 and she was 15. She was 16 when she had our eldest son, who is now 23, and we have four other children.

I wasn't violent in my marriage before our son was born. It soon changed. I learnt jealousy and found I could be attractive to other ladies –

and that my wife could be attractive to other men. We were so young, and all these emotions were very new and very raw, and we didn't know how to control them.

The only comparison I had was my father going off his rocker, so I'd go off my rocker and then I knew from him you just go hard and fast and smash everything in your way. It was sheer rage. I'd blow up over anything, it didn't need much.

The blinds would close again. It would be such a wild, lunatic rage. I was my father all over again. I had to be more than him – in my head. I'd just go berserk and try and smash everything – including my wife. She'd run, but normally the attack would be so fast and ferocious she'd get knocked out. And the beating wouldn't stop because she was knocked out. I knew from experience if I keep punching you and kicking you, you're going to wake up. Away I'd go again...

After I got out of youth prison we headed to Tauranga, where I joined a family gang. They wear patches like the bike gangs, but you need to be family before you join it. Then I went to Auckland and got involved with the Black Power. Over the next few years I was sent to every prison in the South Island – four of them.

When I was 18, I went to jail for armed robbery. Fortunately, the trigger was wet and the gun didn't go off. I still have nightmares about that. I went to a youth prison in Invercargill where I was subjected to a different kind of abuse from other prisoners, who were white supremacists. It wasn't nice to have a brown skin in that prison.

I came out when I was 21 and went back to Motueka. My mother was there, and a lot of other Maori people who had come to do the tobacco thing. They were about to build a new marae there. I was standing in a hall and everyone stood up and did a mihi in Maori. That was



all new to me. I said to my mother "you didn't tell me about this carry-on". My mother didn't want us to learn Maori. She had been whipped at school for speaking her beloved language, and she wanted us to be safe. Her experience was that you got beaten, or got something taken away from you, if you were Maori. All of us felt like that. But when I was standing there in that hall I thought, "I'm going to learn Maori so I can get it back and it can't get lost again".

Through my twenties, I learnt many things – traditional Maori warrior discipline, how to carve, how to gather Maori medicines in the bush. I did a horticultural cadetship for three years – with Ngati Rarua trust. It was an iwi initiative, but they made an exception for me because of the work I had done with their tribe.

After that I had a casual job as a fisherman. I'd just go out to sea, come back in for two days, buy kegs of beer, get drunk and go back out to sea. I spent maybe five years like that.

I used to play rep rugby – for Bay of Plenty and then Nelson. My hip got smashed playing rugby, and later I twisted it and my leg froze on me. I got put on pain management and ended up in a wheelchair.

I started gaining weight and the joint couldn't bear it, so when I got out of the wheelchair I had to use crutches and walking sticks.

We had a new baby and she was taken off us by CYPS and given to my older brother – because I was a violent person and had been diagnosed as a poly-addictive substance abuser (I was using various drugs). Now we only had our two older children – who were 15 and 14 – and we said, "Oh my gosh, we've got nothing, we're doing nothing".

Then my son got caught smoking marijuana on the playing field at school. He was 15. I went to a school board meeting and said "I'll do anything. I'll go and sit with him in class if that's what it takes for him to achieve". It was a bluff – but they called me on it. They said "thank you very much, we'll see you in class tomorrow morning at 8.15". There was no way out.

**I HAD A  
WONDERFUL MENTOR  
— I STILL HAVE HIM.**

He is the Maori teacher, a wonderful old man called Moeke Paaka. He still mentors me and monitors me. He said to me, "Tremain, what's your legacy? What are you going to leave behind for your grandchildren?"

And I said, "I don't want them to feel hurt like I've felt, I don't want them to see alcohol and drugs like I saw them. I want them to love people, and if they get hurt to accept that and to move on for good people." And he goes "well, how you going to do it?" I said "I don't know."

He couldn't understand the outbursts of anger I'd have for my son. It didn't matter that there was a class of schoolgirls around me, I'd just start swearing – "F-ing this, f-ing that, I want to smash you". Moeke would wait till I'd finished and then he'd say, "Come here, Matua (parent or guide). Is that how you love a person?" I'd say "that's how I was taught". He'd say, "I've never known love like that Tremain. I was never in an environment where you got hit. I can't even think about it and nor am I going to let that thought invade my mind. So next time, don't swear or yell at yourself so loud, and see what happens."

I found, sitting there in the classroom, that I had an empathy for kids. I knew the ones who were being abused at home in various ways. I just knew. And they could tell me. One of my faults is that I am kind of fearless, so I'd go to their houses and say to their parents "you'd better cut it out". Everyone who used to hide under the blanket couldn't now, because I was onto them and if they didn't stop it, I was going to tell everyone else.

The parents started coming to school and saying "sorry bro" – to me.

But I got kicked out of the school because I was still dealing drugs, selling cannabis to school kids. The school knew – but they couldn't track me because I was too good at hiding what I was doing. Finally the school called a meeting, along with the Maori community, and I had to front up to my nephew's parents for giving him a marijuana cigarette – and I was told to leave the school and never to go near a school again.



After that I was lost in limbo for six months. That meeting really knocked me, it was so painful. I was back on the benefit again, doing nothing. Then Moeke found me and said "Your lessons in life are to teach you. You've had so many, and that's for you to help other people with their lives."

**THEY SAY VIOLENCE  
BEGETS VIOLENCE –**

**I COULD SEE THE CIRCLE  
RIGHT IN FRONT OF MY FACE,**

**AND I COULD SEE THAT I  
HAD THE OPPORTUNITY  
OF CHANGING IT.**

What was I going to do – walk away and let what I had been through happen to other children? Or was I going to be what I call 'man-up enough' so that I could show the kids "I was like you and there is a way out...".

I could see this change could really work. Then, funnily enough, the criminal fraternity started going, "You're shit. You're just doing it to get a name for yourself." My stubbornness kicked in and I wasn't going to the pub any more, and the marijuana didn't taste nice to me any more, and even though I am a chronic alcoholic, I drastically cut my intake of alcohol.

I had to get away from all the 'doubting Thomases' – all the people I had grown up with.

I had to leave everybody I thought I loved to become the person I had to be – to help me first, to help my family secondly, and thirdly, to become the exemplar that Moeke wanted me to be.

Then I learnt Maori at polytech and I started doing social work, facilitating for Get Safe Motueka, and becoming a coordinator for Maori Men Against Violence. Now I am the violence free champion for the anti-violence campaign. It's not OK in Nelson, and I do lots of work with the Women's Refuge.

I'm also working with a local group, the Health Action Trust, because they want to break the drug and alcohol cycle, and with the Child and Adolescent Youth Alcohol and Drug Advisory arm. They are all professionals and doctors. They asked if I'd sit in on one of their meetings. And I looked at all these people and said, "You don't have an idea, do you?" They had these wonderful ideas, but none of them had even walked into the pub, and they were trying to imagine what it was like for youth to go and buy drugs off a dealer. So I went in to see them a bit later and said, "Did you know I really did all that stuff you guys are trying to research and you should ask me because I'll tell you, and then if there's any way you can figure out how to combat it, do it."

I told them about how I used to deal drugs at the school. I told them: "Just think of me as Mr Whippy. I'll pull up outside your school gate, I'll whistle out to your little Johnny and tell him I've got the ice cream you want. I'll sell him a tinny – a tinfoil of marijuana – worth twenty dollars, and 'I'll give you two extra because I like you and you can just pay me back a bit later'. Got you! I'd know I was in because he's got to pay me later, and later is the next time I'm back at the school being Mr Whippy again. He'll come back in and I'll say, 'You owe me two but I'll give you three and you just owe me five'. And he'll pay for two – and now he owes me a hundred dollars. And later I'm going to put the screws on, 'Get me that hundred bucks or I'm going to hammer you.'

I'll come to your Mum and Dad's house. Next minute Mum's missing her watch and her rings, and Mr Whippy's got them."

When I gave them that scenario, they said 'no!' And I said, "Well, how else do they do it?"

I'm just so sad, now that I am in my forties, that I couldn't have lived this life I live now when I was younger. It takes so much self-healing to know it wasn't your fault, to know that you are all right and that there are things you can offer to others, that there is hope out there even though you think there isn't.



When I was in the gang culture, I hurt so many people and saw so many people hurt and was hurt so much myself.

**I LOOK BACK NOW ON THE  
GANG LIFE AND I CAN SEE  
THERE IS NO LIFE IN IT.**

I would have quite happily laid my life down for people then, but now I see it wasn't even friendship, it was only to get our self gratification and to make more money, because we didn't want to work for it. We were going to do what we knew was wrong and justify it by saying, "They wouldn't give it to us anyway bro. We're Maoris, we're useless."

