

# What the Bird Sees in Flight

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*Collected Stories of a New Zealand Farming Family*

Joseph R. Goodall



*Listening Leaves Press*

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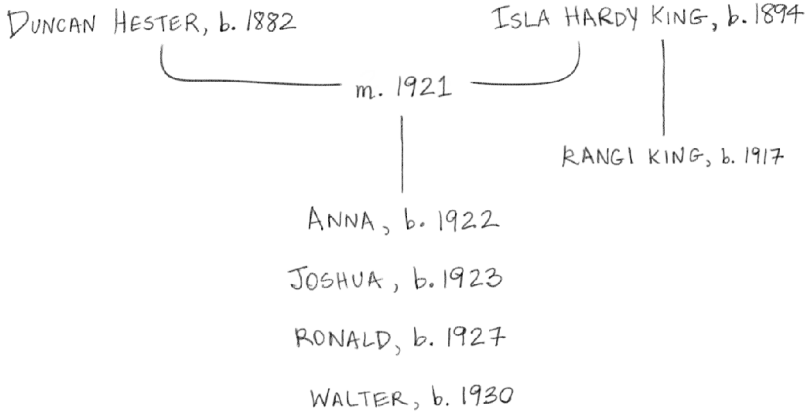
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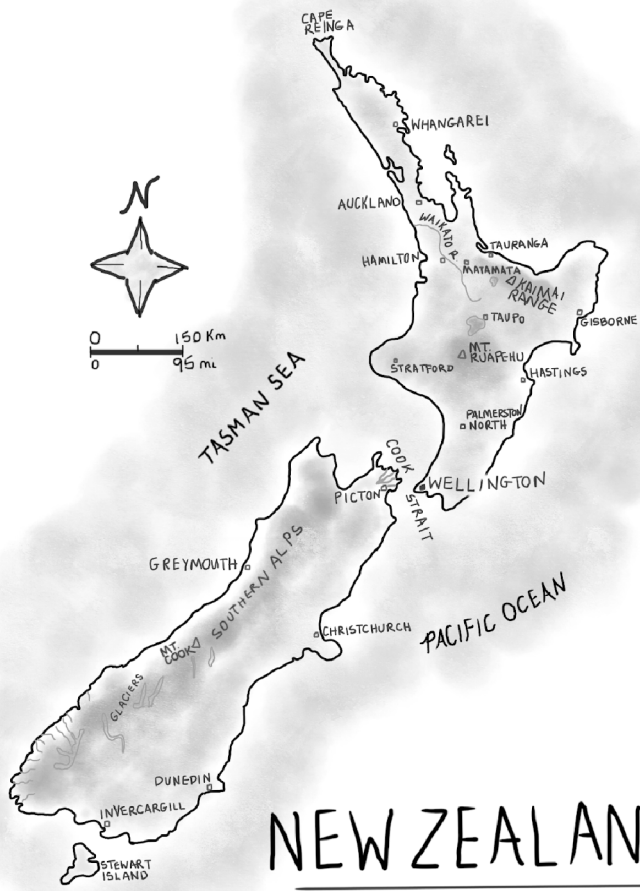
*Dedicated to John Russell Goodall —*

*I am his namesake and grandson, he is my inspiration as a  
writer and man.*

# The Hester Family Tree

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# NEW ZEALAND

*Aotearoa*

"LAND OF THE LONG  
WHITE CLOUD"



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*The Farmhouse — Whare Pāmu*



# The Limping Farmer

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*Matamata, 1957*

“Isla, hand me that bucket will you, love?” Duncan took the bucket from his wife and slopped the pigs. He leaned over, wincing, as the hefty animals swarmed around them.

Isla stood tall, her gum boots sinking in the mud as she held Duncan’s arm steady. Her face wrinkled as it twisted into a grimace, yet she was noticeably younger than her husband.

“Careful, dear, you’ll topple over right into the muck,” she said.

“These pigs are ready.” Duncan gave her a quick peck on the cheek as he straightened.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to count them?” she asked.

“I did.”

“Will you remember the number?”

“Of course, there’s less than twenty.” Duncan lumbered out of the pigpen, Isla trying to keep up. They walked along the fence line toward their small house, rising and falling across gentle, deep green hills. The fence divided their property in two, extending from the main thoroughfare to a winding stream that fed into the Waikato River. Duncan maintained a brisk pace despite his weak leg and heavy breathing. Isla told him she was worried about his heart, but he continued on, using both the fence posts and his wife’s arm for support. Dense clouds filled the sky above them, dark gray and heavy like the pockmarked stones covering the hill behind their house.

“Why won’t you get Ron or Wally to come help?” She inspected his face, which was coarse with gray stubble.

Duncan didn't answer.

"Duncan, dear, have you spoken to them lately?" Her voice raised an octave.

Duncan still didn't answer as they neared a gate in the fence. Instead, he pet the snouts of two cows that came to greet them from the other side.

"I think you should call them," Isla said, pressing her luck.

"Ron and Wally?" Duncan searched through the items in his pockets.

"Yes. And the other children." Isla hoped Duncan would understand her train of thought.

"Take a look at ya, old girls." Duncan said to the cows, offering them some feed. Isla pursed her lips and looked the cows over as well.

"Remember when Anna named one of the cows Miss Perkins? She had it in her mind for so long that Miss Perkins was her *horse*." A smile crept across her face.

Duncan nodded, his face still grave. Isla helped him wrap a measuring tape around the cows' bodies. This time, she abstained from asking if he'd remember the numbers.

"Will you really sell all of them?" she asked on their way to the chicken coop.

"What gave you that idea?" Duncan scowled, making eye contact with Isla and betraying a hint of warmth in his gaze.

She eyed him warily. "I saw your notes at the telephone."

"You've been on my case all year." He gestured, looking away. "Figured I'd finally oblige. I've some good offers for the cows and the pigs," he said matter-of-factly, as if he'd kept his wife abreast of his plans from the beginning.

"I told you I can manage. You need to be focused on your health," Isla said as her husband struggled to open each latch of the custom-made chicken coop.

*The Limping Farmer*

“I won’t be here forever. It’s my job to sort out the farm business.”

“And who said that?”

“I want you to be well cared for,” Duncan said.

The constrained birds burst from the cage, cackling and immediately scouring the rich floodplain soil for food. Isla insisted that she feed the chickens after Duncan began struggling with the bag of grain. As the birds pecked at her boots, Isla suddenly burst out laughing.

“What are you carrying on about?” Duncan tossed the half-emptied bag into the nearby shed and fiddled with the keys to lock it.

“Remember when the boys would scare the chickens? Rangi would lead them all in his scare dance. Chooks chooks chooks!” She waddled haphazardly and squealed, sending the frightened chickens scurrying away. Her body shuddered in mirth. She shot a glance toward Duncan, who was looking at his dirty hands.

“I was probably too hard on them, wasn’t I?” He kept his head down.

Isla approached him and hooked her arm under his. “You taught them all so much.”

“Sometimes I wonder if it accomplished anything,” Duncan fixed his eyes forward again. Isla stayed quiet. Any response she could offer felt like forcing water into an overflowing pitcher.

Rain began to fall in large drops as they hobbled back to the farmhouse, arm in arm. Their home was elevated off the ground with large stones and had settled unevenly, giving it a slight, oddly charming lean. A trellis circled the crawl space, wild plants winding through it in every direction. A sparse collection of trees were anchored into the hill behind the house, the land rising into the distance like a wavy green backdrop. It felt like home, but it also felt quiet and sad.

*What the Bird Sees in Flight*

Inside, Isla prepared cups of tea and they sat down at the round, wooden table in the kitchen as part of their morning routine. Duncan was still breathing heavily as he jabbed his chest with his knuckles. Isla watched him, trying to remain calm. When he began to clutch his shirt, just below the collar, she quickly stood and helped him to bed, reassuring him softly. Her words were as much for her comfort as his; her stomach was in knots.

“I need to make a call. I need to tell Jim Brown about the cows and pigs,” Duncan said as soon as his head met the pillow.

“No you don’t. You need to rest.” She placed her hand gently on his chest. She thought he seemed better. They stared at each other as if playing chess.

“I know you’re trying to sell the farm,” Isla finally said.

“It’s time.”

“I know. I was hoping you’d come around. It’s sad, but we can’t take care of it anymore.”

“I don’t want you to have to care for it on your own.”

“Don’t you worry about me, Duncan Hester.”

Duncan stared across the room, as if viewing a presence invisible to Isla. The light filtering through the window was just bright enough to see that Duncan’s eyes were heavy with tears.

“You need to call the children. They have a right to know. It’s just as much theirs as ours.” Isla felt a sense of urgency.

“I will, in time.”

“All of them?” she whispered.

“I’m in a bad way, love. Can we talk later?” He closed his eyes.

“I’m going to call the doctor, just to be safe.” Isla patted Duncan’s hand, surprised that he did not protest, and retreated to the kitchen.

Nostalgic memories seemed to project onto the room around her like the walls of a maze, like heart-wrenching obstacles on her way to the telephone. A faint ring of dark gray was still burned into the

## *The Limping Farmer*

wall above an electrical outlet, marking the spot where Rangì had caused a small fire while building a radio set. From a dusty corner of the sitting room came the echoes of Anna practicing scales, classical music, and hymns where the upright piano had once stood, before it was sold to pay for more feed. Beyond the dining table was a wooden chest where Joshua had stored his carefully-acquired insect collection, the contents of which he'd used to terrorize his siblings and then eventually as fishing bait. The shelves of Isla's fabric and yarn along one wall of the kitchen had originally contained Ron's and Wally's inventions, metal and wood scraps assembled and torn apart and then given new life as yet another contraption.

Finally at the phone, Isla dialed the local doctor, her sense of time still fluid as she rotated each number like turning back the hands of a clock.

After three attempts, the doctor had still not picked up.

She bit her tongue to hold back curses and looked down at the worn desk surface. Duncan's slanted scrawl filled her view, his collection of dates, sums and reminders written on numerous tea-stained pages, his customary organization progressively unraveling. Numbers from that afternoon caught her eye. She blinked and scanned the list again, confirming to her dismay that Duncan had written incorrect quantities for the chickens, cows and pigs they had recently inspected.

Soon she had her brother in law, Gordon, who was also a doctor, on the other line. She worried that she would not be able to hide her ragged breathing.

"His memory will come and go, Isla," Gordon said. "It's good that you're keeping an eye on him."

Gordon had a way of oversimplifying everything, even mental illness. Usually Isla found it grounding, reassuring. Now it was

infuriating. She wanted to demand an explanation that he could not give. She wanted more time.

Isla scurried to the shelves by the window overlooking one of the cow pastures, rifled through a box and removed piles of woven yarn. Ten, twenty, thirty pieces completed this month. With a call to her neighbor she could get these to a ladies' group and a shop in the town center and pull in a decent profit. The same woman could get her more supplies at a bargain...

The ideas buzzed through her mind until another piercing cough came from the bedroom, and she shot to her feet like a toy soldier at attention.

Isla tried to slow down, to breathe.

"Take care of yourself," Gordon had said before she hung up without a goodbye. She hadn't mentioned Duncan's chest pain, cough, or persistently ailing leg. The local doctor would have to deal with those. But her husband's memories? Their family? Their home?

The window rattled as a gust of wind came against the house. Outside, the grasses of the field were in motion like the choppy surf off Raglan coast, bowing in alternating directions like a tide. A rainbow of wildflowers blanketed the hillside, waves of purple, yellow and red petals brilliant today but gone tomorrow.

Isla stowed her knitting away and returned to the bed holding a plainly framed picture.

"I know you're an old man and can't see as well as you used to, but I want you to look at their faces again." She handed him the picture and leaned toward him on the bed. Rangi, Anna, Joshua, Ron and Wally stared back at them, frozen in time. Duncan clutched the frame with trembling hands.

"I always like to think Rangi looks like you, too." She ran a finger over the image, pointing to the tallest boy, her firstborn, his dark hair and olive skin a stark contrast to the other family members.

*The Limping Farmer*

“We’ve lost him, Isla. You know he doesn’t want to stay in touch.”

“We must write to him at least. I don’t care about the money, I just want them all to know. To be part of it if they want to.”

“Listen, we can leave Joshua out of this, too, since he left the country. That’s fair.” Duncan wheezed.

“You told me you claimed Rangi as your son. You can’t ignore him any more.” Isla watched her husband’s jaw set, his glistening eyes bulge in their sockets, and she immediately regretted her words.

Duncan grunted and forced the picture from her hand, sending it to the wooden floor with a clatter.

“This isn’t about Rangi or Joshua, or about any of the children,” he said. “They made their intentions known when they left. We have to make ends meet for ourselves, Isla.”

Isla peered down at the image of her children, immortalized in their youth, the glass over their faces now fractured. She clasped her hands together as if in prayer and turned back to the bed.

“This is our home, Duncan. Where the children grew up, where we’ve grown old together. When we release it, I want it to be as a family.”

“No one wants the damn farm!” Duncan shouted, before his body erupted into a violent string of coughs.

Isla rubbed her husband’s shoulder and kissed his forehead. She waited to respond, hoping he’d concede.



*The Sailboat — Waka Tere*



# The Whales Beneath

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*Tory Channel, 1956*

The small fishing boat tacked east and west, making its way south along the Tory Channel toward Picton. The two men aboard were broad shouldered, with knit caps over their long, dark hair. Rocks jutted upward sharply from the sea to starboard. Beyond them, the land formed a backdrop of brown wrinkles. To port, narrow peninsulas extended out toward the boat, forming small, shallow bays where ships liked to run aground. It was getting late in the day, and they still hadn't caught anything.

Mikaere cracked open a beer and took a swig. From his perch on the other side of the mast, Rangi tried to imagine what the drink would feel like going down his throat, which was currently salty from the ocean spray. He tried to remember why he'd agreed to help his friend with his far-fetched scheme to bring in a haul of mackerel. Rangi had spent much less time on the ocean than Mikaere. He was a land dweller, a farmer's runaway son, and his upset stomach was the only reason he didn't join the other man drinking. Seasickness was almost akin to intoxication—light-headedness, distorted vision, and vomit—but without any of the more pleasant, albeit temporary, side effects.

"They hated her." Mikaere pulled a net into the boat as he spoke, the Maori tattoo patterns wrapped around his forearms rippling. "The first time I bring a woman home for them to meet and they hate her."

Rangi, barely listening, kept noticing instead where Mikaere left his bottle, instinctively positioning himself to catch it if the boat shifted unexpectedly. Why didn't his friend pay more attention to his things?

"Do you even know what I'm talking about?" Mikaere adjusted the sail to increase their speed. "You've dated a *Pakeha* before, I'm sure. What gets me is this girl really could be the one. I wouldn't have taken her to meet my parents otherwise, white girl or not. My mum doesn't know about all the women I've been with. She wouldn't want to. But this one is special."

"I haven't dared take a girl home, even now that my parents are practically on their deathbed." Rangi felt awkward just sitting on a crate, but he truly couldn't bring himself to stand up.

"Of course you haven't. You never go home." Mikaere laughed deeply from his belly.

Rangi took a deep breath. The wind was on his back, so he hoped Mikaere couldn't hear his curses.

"I'm telling it like it is, ain't I?" Mikaere shouted over the wind.

"Leave me be," Rangi said.

"Damn, you're terrible at conversation."

Rangi finally stood and leaned over the side of the boat. Gigantic mammals circled beneath the choppy surf. A jet of warm mist shot into the air as a whale surfaced nearby. He'd never seen a whale so close before.

"Pull your own weight, won't you?" Mikaere threw him a rope to coil. He had brought the boat to a standstill and was gathering a net to cast.

"There are some humpbacks below us," Rangi said, struggling to wrap the rope around his arm, still distracted by creatures.

Mikaere inspected the turquoise water, which sparkled like the underside of a *paua* shell. "What such strange beasts. Takes a hell of

an operation to bring ‘em in,” he said, his neck craned over the bow. “My mate was on one of the last ships to hunt those things. You know they say the entire industry’s over.”

Rangi nodded, continuing to wind the rope over, under.

“Have you ever been on a whaling ship?” Mikaere asked, throwing the net out into the water with a labored grunt.

“I used to work on the docks,” Rangi croaked, pausing to rub his abdomen.

“Yes, of course. You told me that. You were the only Islander, weren’t you?”

“I’m used to it.”

“What’s it like? I mean, your mum’s a *Pakeha*, isn’t she?” Mikaere gave him a genuinely curious look.

Rangi spread his feet further apart and closed his eyes. His body felt like rubber. He wasn’t sure if it was shame, withdrawal, or the seasickness.

“Hurl over the side, mate, or you’ll be scrubbing the decks.” Mikaere seemed to finally take notice of his condition.

“I’m OK.” Rangi opened his eyes and looked at another whale surfacing, deciding to tell more of his story. “Yes, my mum’s white. My dad was Maori, but he was killed during the first War.”

“So you’re an old bastard then?”

“I’ll be forty next year.”

Mikaere chuckled. “No, I mean your dad knocked up your—”

“They were married.” Rangi tossed the coiled rope into a pile on the deck.

“Oh, wow. That doesn’t happen.” Mikaere surveyed the horizon as he prepared another net.

“Well, they were. But my mom remarried later. A businessman more than ten years older than her, who then started a dairy farm. I

was just a little tyke, but then all of a sudden I had four younger siblings. It was a blur.”

“I think that’s the most you’ve ever told me about yourself.”

Rangi staggered to the side and vomited. Now his mouth was sour, but at least the churning in his stomach subsided.

“I didn’t mean to make you sick.” Mikaere tossed his empty bottle in a canvas bag and then reached for a new one.

“Throw me one, will you?” Rangi said, his hands on his knees, staring into the grimy, tan deck.

“You sure? I know how you get,” Mikaere said condescendingly.

“I need it.”

“Yeah, just not too much. We need to catch something if we’re gonna make this trip worthwhile.”

“You’re drinking.”

“Not like you do.” Mikaere tossed Rangi a cold bottle.

Rangi threw his head back and felt the chilled rush of beer through his chest. He didn’t notice the taste—it was a light, flavorless brew—but he was immediately at ease to be drinking.

“You don’t think it’s bad, do you?” Mikaere asked.

“What?” Rangi licked the foam off his lips.

“Me being with a white woman.”

“Hell, no. I thought you were asking about the beer. It’s terrible.”

Mikaere mockingly stepped back in shock. “You feeling better now?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Rangi said, but his gut was disagreeing with him again. Still, he continued chugging his beer.

“Well, how’s it like for you? Is it easier to date a white lady or a Maori?”

The question Rangi hadn’t wanted to think about or answer. “Shit, it’s just the color of her skin.”

“I don’t see you with many women.” Mikaere checked the nets stretched over the side.

Rangi cursed at his friend, cast his emptied bottle over the railing, and wobbled angrily toward the stern. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair and clenched his other hand tightly into a fist. It was a while before he realized he’d been staring cross-eyed at the same rock, lost in thought about jumping overboard to join his bottle.

“Come here, mate! Help me haul this in.” The urgency in Mikaere’s voice convinced Rangi to take him seriously. He was surprised to find the other man straining to bring a net onboard. Once they’d heaved the load of fish onto the deck, both men sat back against the side of the boat, breathing heavily.

“Do you know about *kaitiaki*?” Mikaere asked.

“Is that the Maori name for these fish?”

“No, mate, it’s the name given to whale guides. *Kaitiaki* led the canoes of our ancestors to this land.”

“I don’t know why I’m missing my sea legs then,” Rangi quipped.

“Listen, I know it really bothers you that you didn’t grow up in a Maori family. But you’re not alone, eh? We all find our way in our own time, with the right direction. What’s it gonna take? If Tangaroa, the god of the sea, rose from this water himself and claimed you as his son, would you consider yourself Maori?”

Rangi stared blankly out toward the horizon, his thoughts pulled back to his childhood.

“There was one time where my mum set me up with this white girl in our church,” he said in halting speech, as if talking to himself. “Honestly, we hit it off. I didn’t think we would. Then a while later, when we were walking through town, she made these snide comments about a Maori family, and then another about a

group of Islander men at a bar. It was then I knew she didn't really see me. I was just one of her people."

"What did you do?" Mikaere asked quietly, reminding Rangi he wasn't alone.

"That was around the time I left town. I never saw her again."

"She was a bush girl, probably never left her own town. City women like some brown skin." Mikaere growled lasciviously. Rangi feigned a half smile. They sat silently for a minute. Memories continued to rush through Rangi's mind. He felt less sick as he talked openly, so he eventually continued.

"I fell in love with a Maori woman on the coast a few years back. She had the most lovely hair and eyes, and a keen sense of business. She was a chief's daughter, the whole lot. But you wouldn't have known from the way she carried herself. She worked on the dock because she wanted to. And she had a connection with animals, like me."

"Don't worry, I won't make a joke about your connection with animals." Mikaere tugged at the net to keep the fish contained.

Rangi glared at Mikaere.

"She sounds like a keeper," Mikaere said, straight-faced.

"She was wild, carefree, brilliant. I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her."

"Did her father not take a liking to you?"

"I never met him. I couldn't. I don't know anything about Maori tradition. It gnawed at me. I don't think she saw me as one of her people. I was just the bloke at the dock she had a thing for. I picked up and left soon after."

As the sun set, the boat rocked and the dying fish in the net flopped at their feet.

"Well, if my woman and I have a kid, I'll be sure you're the godfather."

*The Whales Beneath*

“You’ve thought ahead about that?”

“I just did.” Mikaere laughed.

For some reason, those words meant something to Rangi. Mikaere reached over and squeezed his friend’s shoulder. Rangi was suddenly conscious that he was leaning back against Mikaere’s other arm. He thought about when he and his brothers used to pile into the tiny cow shed on their farm to hide away from their dad’s chores, their bodies huddled close as they took turns peeking through the small window, surfacing carefully like the whales beneath the boat coming up for air. He turned his head to look at his friend.

“Thanks, mate.”

Mikaere smirked. “You want another?” He stood and retrieved two more beers.

“No, I couldn’t stomach it.”

Rangi hoped he could stay sober when they got back to land.