



The Mohawk

by Sarah Johnson

Leo sat, eyes closed, head fixed straight ahead. There was a sound like swarming bees as the clippers moved up from the base of his skull to follow round his right ear. The buzzing stopped and then restarted as the barber shifted the clippers and began again. This time, he worked closer to the middle. Leo screwed his eyes tighter. He wasn't ready to look.

Now the barber started plucking at the top of his head. He spent ages, pulling and tweaking. When he'd finished, he placed a hand on Leo's shoulder. "Take a look," he said.

Leo opened his eyes. The sides of his head were closely clipped, the hair almost gone. The rest had been sculpted into sharp spikes that jostled all the way from his forehead to the back of his neck. A mohawk, just like he'd asked. "Awesome," he said.

The barber handed him a small tub. "You'll need this. Gel. Super strong."

Leo went to meet his mum and brother at the library. "Wow," said Mum, smiling. "Do you like it?" Leo ran his hand over the stiff spikes and nodded uncertainly.

"Radical," Matthew said. "You'll slay it at school tomorrow."

"Thanks," said Leo. He didn't feel rad – he felt shaky. Like someone had cut off a limb. He'd spent the whole summer growing his hair, and now it was gone.

That night, Leo slept carefully, his head propped high on the pillow. In the morning, he woke with a stiff neck and a mohawk that was now lopsided. He used the gel to spike it back up. Soon the points were as sharp and defined as yesterday. Leo examined himself carefully in the mirror. He looked good.

At his old school, Leo hadn't really been anyone. It was a big place; he and his friends hadn't stood out. They hadn't been the bad kids or the cool kids. They hadn't been the kids who were good at sport or were always getting certificates at assembly. They were the kids who were just there.

But today was Leo's first day at intermediate. Things were going to be different. For a start, this school was way bigger than South Central Primary. Something drastic was called for – otherwise, he'd fade into the background the way he always had. His haircut was it.

Leo felt taller on his way to school. The mohawk was like having a puppy on his head – he could feel it bounce and wag as he walked. He had to resist the urge to give it a pat.

Apo and Dylan were waiting near the corner. Apo laughed when he saw Leo, but Dylan frowned. "What's that?" he said.

Leo touched one of the spikes. "It's a mohawk."

"I know that." Dylan was still frowning. "But why?"

Dylan's hair was cut short at the back and sides. The top was longer, with a thick fringe that hung in his eyes. Apo's black hair was wavy. He wore it short. Leo's own hair had been pretty much the same as Dylan's – before the haircut.

Leo shrugged. "I wanted to do something. You know ... a change."

Dylan looked at Apo, an unasked question on his face. Apo looked at his feet. Leo could feel his face heat up.

"It's weird," Dylan finally said.

"I thought you'd like it."

"Well, I don't," Dylan said flatly.



There was an assembly first thing so that the principal could welcome the new students. Leo noticed a couple of kids looking; a few smirked. He hadn't expected that. He searched the room, heart pounding. He wasn't the only one with a different look. One girl had purple streaks. Another kid had a rat's tail.

At the end of assembly, the class lists were called out. Leo's teacher was someone called Matua Glen. Neither Apo nor Dylan were in his class, and he felt another stab of panic.

"See you at lunchtime," Apo said. "We'll play football."

Dylan said nothing.

In his home room, Leo sat at the back. It was only nine-thirty, but already he'd had enough for one day. Matua Glen had a kind face and the greenest eyes Leo had ever seen. He noticed those eyes flick his way as Matua Glen read out the roll. "Had he checked out the other kids too?" Leo wondered. "What was his teacher thinking?"

Shyly, Leo dropped his head. Even then, he could sense his hair sticking up a mile, shouting for attention.



Leo tried to find Apo and Dylan at break. Instead, he ran into Milo and Sean, cool kids from his old school. Ava spotted them, too, and came over.

"What'd ya do to your hair?" Milo asked.

"Had it cut," said Leo.

"Obviously!" Milo said. "Did you think it would make you look cool or something?"

Leo shrugged. He didn't know what to say. The mohawk was cool – but he didn't think he was. That wasn't the idea.

Ava studied Leo's head. "You could flatten it, you know. In the bathroom. You could use water to make it lie flat."

Leo touched the spikes again. "Nah, I'm good," he said.

After break, Matua Glen explained the term's topic: protest and social action. They spent time discussing what this meant, then Matua Glen asked whether anyone in the class had worked for change.

Leo had done the forty-hour famine last year. He began to raise his hand, then thought better of it. Too late.

"Leo, isn't it?" Matua Glen said. Leo nodded. "You had something to say?"

The whole class was looking now. Some of the kids seemed interested, but Leo shook his head. His face burned.

After social studies came maths. Leo liked maths. There was an easy handout, and he finished just as the bell went. As he was packing up, Matua Glen stopped by his desk. "It's a shame we didn't hear from you earlier," he said.

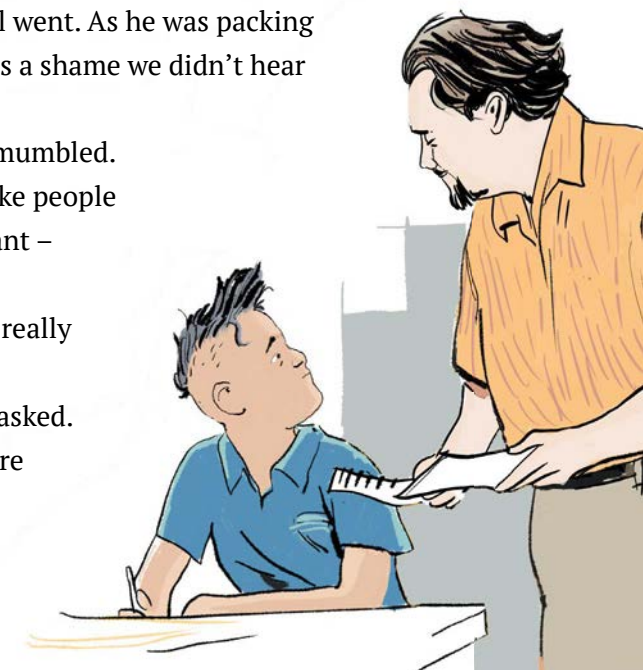
"I forgot what I wanted to say," Leo mumbled.

Matua Glen raised his eyebrows. "I like people who have something to say. It's important – don't you think?"

Leo nodded. Matua Glen's eyes were really intense. They were hard to look at.

"What's with the hair?" Matua Glen asked.

"It's a mohawk," Leo muttered, unsure what he was getting at.



Matua Glen smiled. "I know. I just wondered what it's about ... whether you're making a statement of some kind?"

Leo shrugged. "Not really. It's just a haircut. I felt like a change."

"Just a haircut," said Matua Glen. "You think?" He handed Leo a piece of paper. It had two website addresses. "Take a look after school," he said. "Tell me what you think."

At home, Leo answered Mum's questions about the day, then he went straight to the bathroom mirror. The mohawk was still there, prouder than ever. He wondered if he should wash out the gel, like Ava had said, see what was left. Perhaps he could swish his hair to the side ... or have a part like Bart Simpson's. "What's the best option?" he wondered.

In the meantime, he looked up Matua Glen's websites. The first was on the history of mohawks. There was a drawing of a Pawnee warrior, another of a Huron. There were also black-and-white photos of soldiers with mohawks from the Second World War, most of them American paratroopers. Leo hadn't known about them. Lastly, there were photos showing punks. They wore coloured mohawks, short mohawks, crazily long mohawks. But Leo wasn't so interested in their style. What he noticed most was their pride. These people knew what they were about. They had something to say.

The second website was about animal rights in New Zealand, with photos of protesters. Leo was still studying the page when Matthew got home. "How was your day?" he asked.

"Kind of strange."

"First days are like that," said Matthew. "It gets better."

"Some kids didn't like my hair," Leo said. "They think I'm weird."

Matthew laughed. "Forget them. It's great. I might get a mohawk myself. In solidarity."

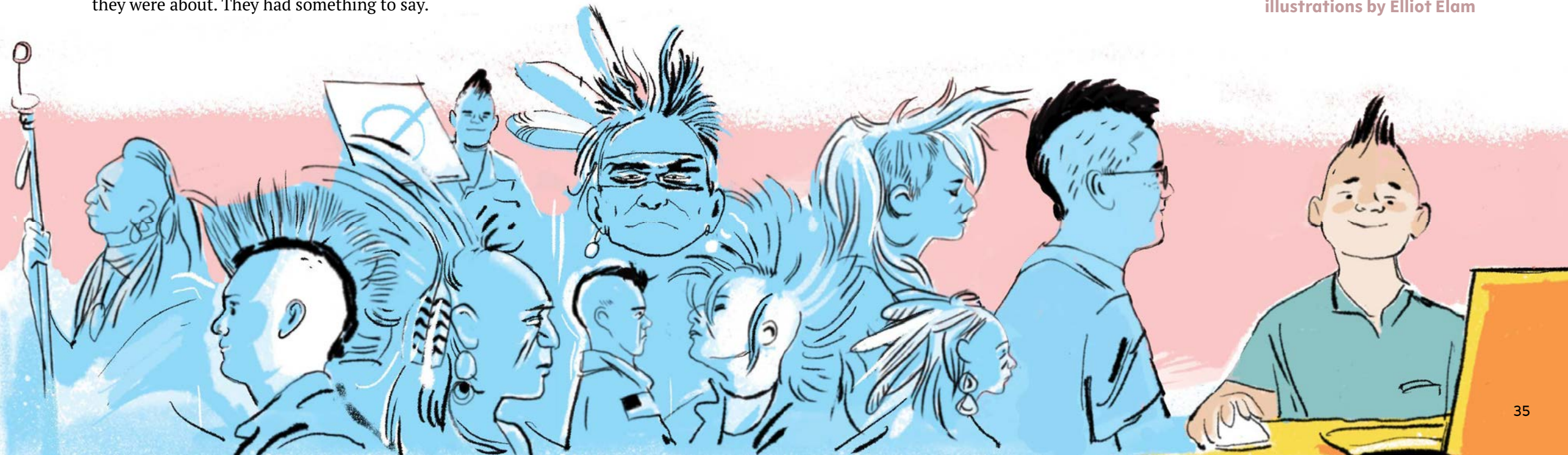
Leo smiled. "A brohawk."

"Exactly. We can be weird together."

Leo flicked back to the animal rights website. He wanted to take a closer look. Something had caught his eye. It was in a photo of an animal rights march. One of the protesters had a bright red mohawk – and intense eyes. They stared straight at the camera. The photo had been taken a long time ago, but it was clearly a younger Matua Glen.

Leo would talk to him tomorrow. First, he wanted to read about mohawks. Who had first worn them and why? He raised his hand to touch his hair again. The mohawk was still there, part of him now. Maybe he did have something to say, after all.

illustrations by Elliot Elam



The Mohawk

by Sarah Johnson

Text copyright © Crown 2019

Illustrations by Elliot Elam copyright © Crown 2019

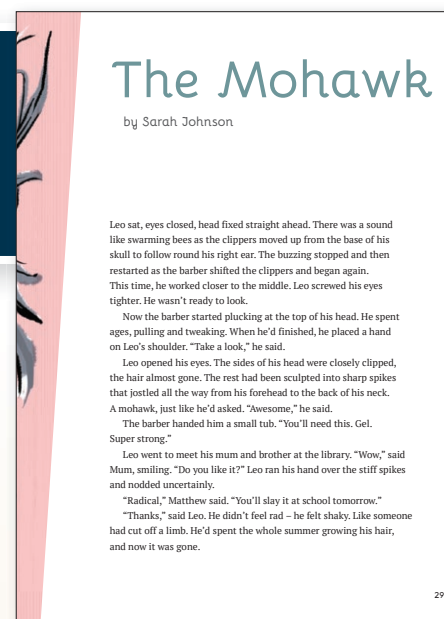
For copyright information about how you can use this material, go to:
<http://www.tki.org.nz/Copyright-in-Schools/Terms-of-use>

Published 2019 by the Ministry of Education
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

All rights reserved.
Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77669 675 8 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Hōne Apanui and Emeli Sione



SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 AUGUST 2019

Curriculum learning areas	English Health and Physical Education
Reading year level	Year 6
Keywords	bullying, change, friendship, hair, hairstyle, identity, individuality, mohawk, pride, protest, rebellion, role model, school, siblings, social action