

The Pink Umbrella

by Lani Young

Sam shut his eyes and slumped in his seat, cringing. The kids in the front of the bus were laughing, and he had a hunch who they were laughing at.

“Look at that old lady’s umbrella!” someone said.

Sam jerked upright. Oh, no. She hasn’t! He looked. She had. This was worse than he’d thought. There at the bus stop was his grandmother with her new umbrella. The jumbo-sized one that was neon pink; the one she’d bought from the shop up the road, exclaiming “Oka, lima tala!” over the bargain price.

Sam shook his head in misery.

The other kids jostled and shoved to get off. But Sam took his time, dragging each foot. The driver gave him an irritated glance. “Hurry up, kid. I’ve got a schedule to keep.”

Off the bus, Sam walked even slower, head down ... waiting for the others to leave. “Samuelu, tope. Hurry up,” his grandmother called impatiently.

“Hi, Mama.”

She ignored his greeting, didn’t kiss him hello. She wasn’t that kind of grandmother. Instead, she grumbled about the grass stains on his shorts, his untucked shirt. She had other things to say, too. Especially about the girls who were walking ahead of them and laughing loudly. “Tautalaititi. So cheeky. Who are their parents?”

Sam didn’t answer. He was used to his grandmother’s comments. It had been three weeks since she’d come to live with them, and in that time, he’d learnt a lot. Like which of his grandmother’s questions he wasn’t meant to answer.





When their mother had told them that Mama was coming from Sāmoa, Sam and Mele had been excited.

“Good,” said Mele, poking her brother. “Now I won’t be stuck with you every afternoon.”

“Yeah, well I won’t have to eat your stink cooking.”

“Cut it out,” said Mum. “You’re lucky to have each other. And your grandmother will be a great help for me.” Sam felt a stab of guilt. His mum was a nurse and often worked extra shifts when the money from their dad didn’t come.

Mele rushed to reassure their mother. “It’s going to be awesome having Mama here.”

Sam agreed. Unlike Mele, he’d never been to Sāmoa and hadn’t met any of his mother’s family.

He imagined Mama would be like his best friend’s grandmother. It would be nice having someone live with them.

But Mama was nothing like Hunter’s grandmother. She insisted on calling him by his Samoan name – all the time. Mama also had lots of opinions. She said it was time her grandchildren spoke Samoan and decided the best way for them to learn was reading the Samoan Bible together – every night. “Samuelu, tapē le TV.” Sam never got to watch his favourite programmes any more, and he dreaded Saturdays. Mama would be up at dawn, cutting the grass in the front yard – with a bush knife. People driving past would stare at the old lady wielding a sapelu and wearing baggy sweatpants underneath her mu’umu’u.

The one silver lining in all of this misery was Mama’s cooking. Instead of Mele’s burnt toast and cold baked beans, dinner now was big pots of sapaui or fa’alifu. Mama made the best panipopo they’d ever tasted, trays of sticky sweet coconut buns that were even better with hot koko Sāmoa.

But still, Sam had decided sapaui and panipopo weren’t a fair trade-off, especially when Mama insisted on walking him to the bus stop – and home again – each day. And now with her big pink umbrella! It was too much.

“She’s ruining my life,” Sam finally blurted to his sister.

Mele rolled her eyes. “Don’t be a brat. Mama’s fine.”

“It’s easy for you to say. She doesn’t shame you in front of your friends,” said Sam. “And I don’t want to practise my Samoan every night.”

Mele’s eyes suddenly widened, and she shook her head. But Sam was on a roll. “It sucks. Things were better before Mama came. I wish she would go back to Sāmoa!”

“Shut up, you egg,” hissed Mele.

There was a cold, heavy weight in the pit of Sam’s stomach. He turned around slowly.

It was Mama, standing in the doorway. She’d heard every word. She looked angry. But more than that – she looked sad.



Mele put on a plastic smile and hustled Mama away. Sam felt sick. What had he done? He went to his room and lay on his bed. Guilt tasted like sour apples.

The next day, Sam didn't feel like eating breakfast. "Soccer practice," he said, leaving for school early. He kept thinking about what he'd said. He wanted to fix things but didn't know how.

When school finished, Sam missed the bus on purpose. Instead he hung around the sports field with Hunter, and they walked home together,

stopping to buy hot chips. They were outside the shop, licking salt off their burnt fingers, too eager to wait for the chips to cool, when Hunter stopped eating, a panicked look on his face.

"What?" asked Sam. He followed Hunter's gaze to three boys in high school uniforms who were coming towards them.

One of the boys laughed loudly and quickened his pace. "Got any money?" he said. "We're hungry."

"Yeah," added another. "Those chips look good."

The trio surrounded Sam and Hunter. The first boy, who seemed to be the leader, bumped against Sam, making him drop the chips. The boys laughed.

"What's the matter?" the leader said. "You should be more careful. See what you did? What a waste." Sam clenched his fists by his sides but didn't say anything. He wished he'd just gotten on the bus.

A voice came from somewhere behind them. "What are you doing to my grandson?" It was Mama, brandishing her pink umbrella, in warrior mode. "Get away from those kids!" She advanced. "Shame on you.

Who are your parents? Alu ese mai i! Get away from here!" Mama continued with her tirade, this time shouting in Samoan as she used the umbrella to jab in the direction of the offenders. Sam didn't understand all the words, but he was pretty sure he wouldn't find them in the Bible.

The older boys were too stunned to do more than scuttle out of the way, half-laughing in disbelief. When Mama was satisfied her point had been made, she set off down the street, with a brusque command for Sam and Hunter. "Home."





“Is that your grandmother?” Hunter whispered to Sam, amazed.

“Yes,” admitted Sam. People had come out of the shop to look at the spectacle, and he was embarrassed.

“Awesome,” said Hunter. “My grandmother would never do that.”

Sam looked at the old lady striding ahead of them, still muttering about disrespectful teenagers. Hunter was right. Mama was one of a kind.

After Hunter had turned off, Mama and Sam continued together in silence. Finally, Sam blurted, “I’m sorry, Mama. About what I said yesterday.”

Mama stopped to look at him. “You are a good boy, Samuelu.” She didn’t touch him, but her eyes were kind. “Learn more fa’aaloalo. Respect.” Then she pinched his upper arm and frowned. “And eat more kalo. You are too skinny. Grow and those boys won’t bother you. Tomorrow I’ll teach you how to sāsā the vao with the sapelu. Good exercise. It makes big muscles.”

They walked on as the afternoon sky darkened with approaching rain. Mama noticed and opened her umbrella. She handed it to Sam. “Here, you can hold it for us.”

Sam glanced around, checking for people on the street. “OK, Mama,” he said.

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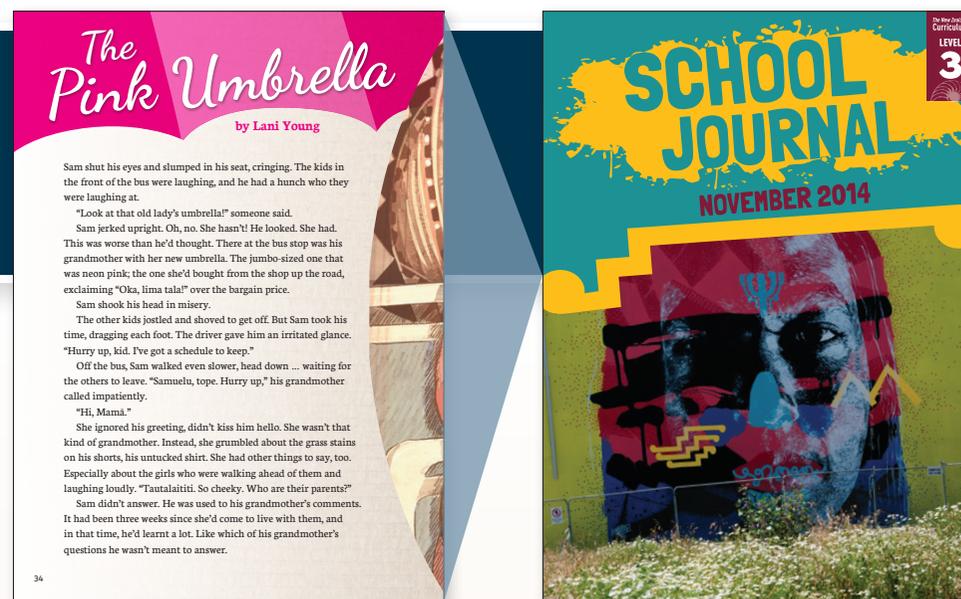
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