

TAUTAI

by Sisilia Eteuati

“Stinky,” Alex called. “I heard you’re going to Sāmoa these holidays. That true?”

Everyone had a nickname. Robert was Hobbit. Lucas was Puke-us. And Tigi’ilagi was Stinky, despite the fact he had rounded out the vowels slowly on his first day. “My name is Tigi-‘i-lagi,” he’d said carefully. “But just call me Lagi. It means ‘sky’, like rangi in Māori.”

But Alex (who was Bean) had latched on to the first part of his name. “Ting-y? Sing-y? Sting-y ... Stinky!” Bean had collapsed laughing. “Definitely Stinky!” The name had stuck.

Lagi shrugged at Bean’s question, even though he was excited. It was his grandmother’s sixtieth birthday, and Lagi’s parents had decided he was old enough to travel by himself to represent their family. “You’re her oldest grandchild, her pele,” Lagi’s father had said. “There could be no better gift.”

Lagi felt proud to be given this job – but at school, he kept his cool.

“Yeah, it’s all right,” he said to the others. “I’m going on a 737.”

Knowing the kind of plane was important. It was like knowing about cars, only better. Lagi’s dad was awesome with cars. He’d just bought one, real cheap, and Lagi had helped fix it up. His dad was really happy after they’d resold it. “High-five,” he said as the man drove off. “We’ve just made enough money to pay for your ticket to Apia.”

Lagi looked for plane books in the library and searched the Internet. “The wing flaps cause lift,” he told the other kids at lunchtime. “The pilots deploy them while they’re waiting on the runway.

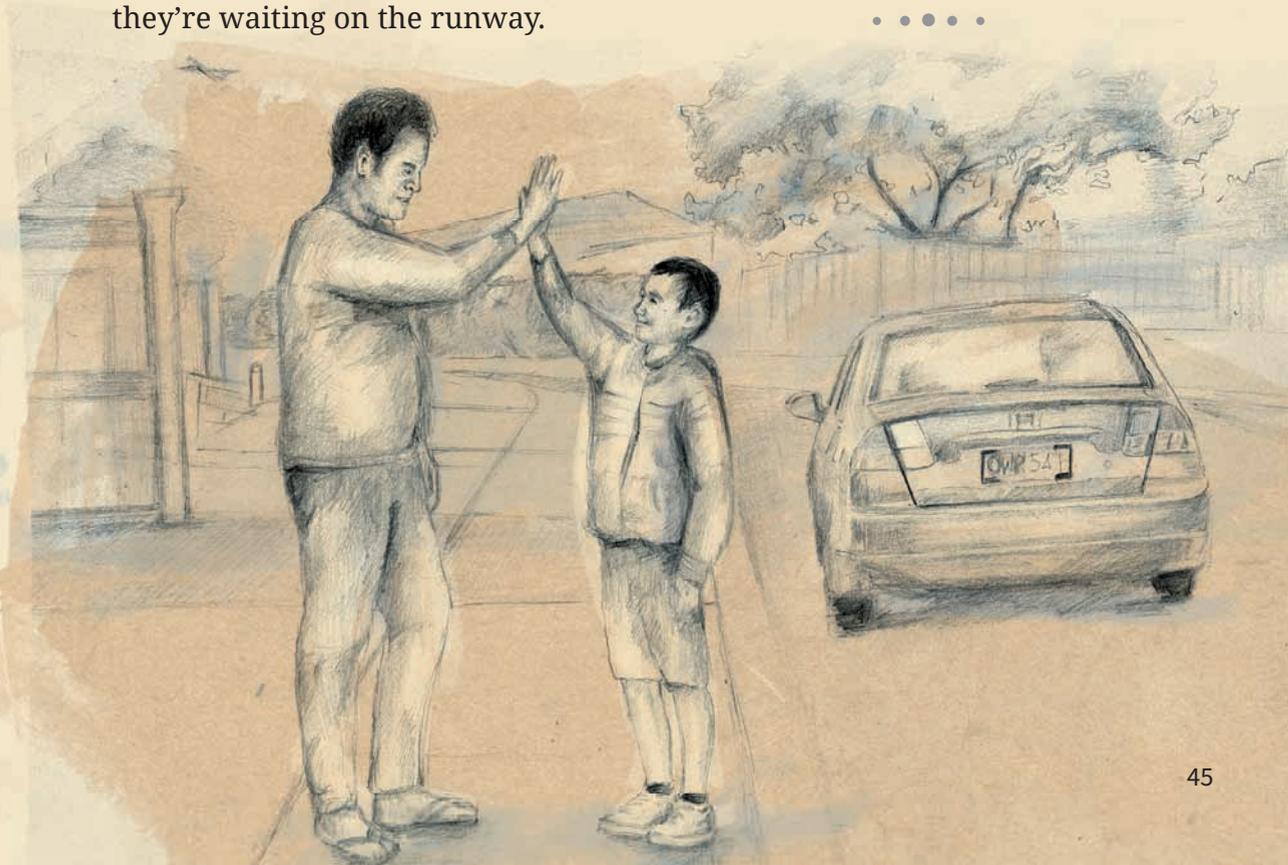
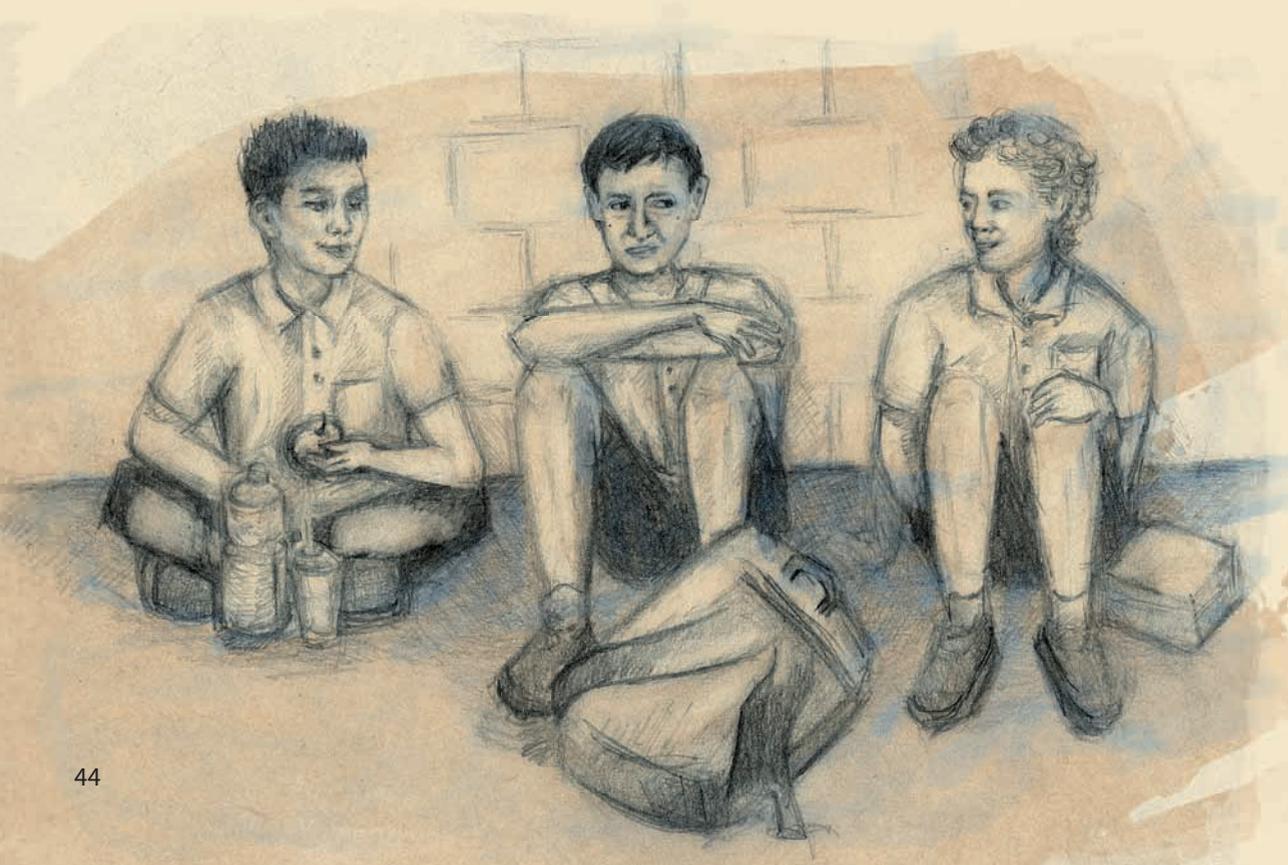
They retract the flaps when the plane starts to climb.” For once, they were all fascinated. Even Lucas Puke-us and Robert Hobbit, who were pretending non-interest on the edge of the circle. Even Bean.

“There’s also the thrust lever. It’s automatic,” Lagi continued. “The autopilot selects the power setting, the pilot pulls back on the control wheel, and then the plane lifts off.”

“How come you know all this?” challenged Bean.

“I saw it on TV,” Lagi said quickly. He knew enough not to admit going to the library.

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The day arrived, and a lady in a red uniform with a scarf met them at the security gates. “I hear we’re flying together,” she said. “My name’s Tracy.” Lagi smiled back shyly. His dad pushed him forward, and he shook Tracy’s hand. “I might be able to get you into the cockpit before we take off,” Tracy added.

“Really?” Lagi asked.

“Yes, *really*. I’ll talk to the pilots.” Tracy tapped the side of her nose. “Now, we need to look out for gate 7.”

Lagi’s excitement welled up as they walked through the airport. The boarding pass seemed to shiver in his hand, but he clutched it tight. “Gate 7,” he yelled when he saw a large black 7 next to a door.

Tracy laughed. “Eagle eyes – just like a pilot’s.”

There were heaps of people waiting around, but Tracy guided Lagi straight to the front counter.

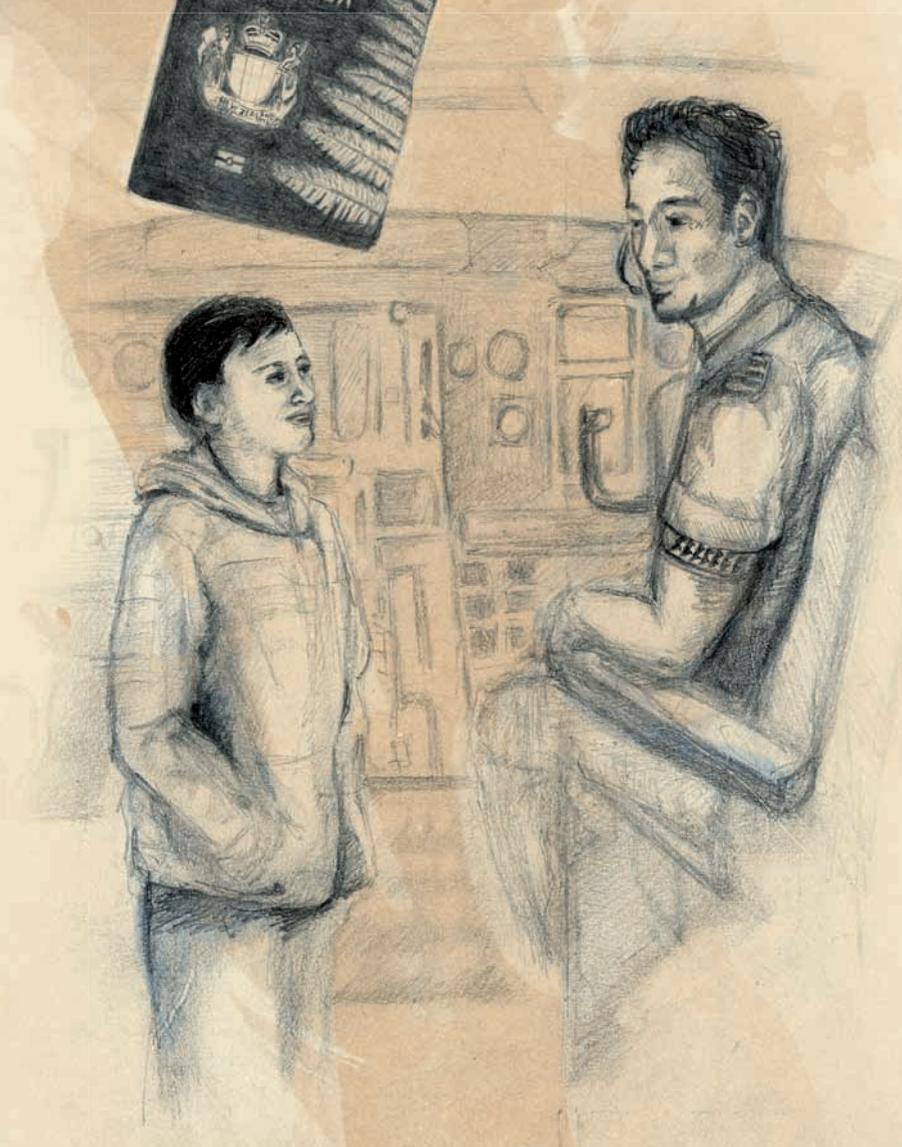
“Perfect timing,” the man behind the counter said.

“The pilots are just finishing their on-board checks. We’re about to board VIPs.” He winked at Lagi.

“Do you have your boarding pass?” The man scanned Lagi’s pass while Tracy used the phone on his desk.

“OK, let’s go,” she said.

They walked down a narrow, metal tunnel that moved ever so slightly. “This is the air bridge,” Tracy explained. Lagi nodded. They reached the plane, and Tracy steered him to the left. The door of the cockpit was open, and Lagi could see lights and gauges on the ceiling, in front of the two pilots ... they seemed to be everywhere. He stood there, his mouth slightly open.



“Captain, this is Tigi’ilagi,” Tracy said.

Lagi noticed the captain’s taulima straight away, an intricate tattoo in a band around his muscular brown arm. On his shoulder, above the tattoo, Lagi could also see the captain’s four gold stripes.

“Tigi’ilagi,” the captain said, pronouncing Lagi’s whole name correctly.

“You’re *Samoan*?” Lagi asked.

“Yes,” the captain laughed. “Just like you. Don’t be so surprised. Our people have always been navigators – tautai – although they didn’t have all this.” The pilot waved towards the gauges. “They navigated by the stars and rode the ocean currents. But then maybe this isn’t so different. The Samoan word for plane, va’alele, means ‘flying boat.’”

“Va’alele,” repeated Lagi. “Cool! Is this the thrust lever?”

The captain laughed. “It sure is. You seem to know a lot about aeroplanes.”

They talked a little longer. Lagi was trying to remember every single word for later.

“We need to take our seats now, Lagi,” Tracy eventually said. “The other passengers are about to board.”

“Sole, listen out for me,” the captain called after him.

Lagi’s legs felt wobbly walking to his seat. He buckled his seatbelt and sat very quietly while the jets started. Soon they would be taking off. Out of his window, he could see another plane parked next to them.

Tracy smiled at him when their plane finally began to move. Slowly, they made their way to the end of the runway. Lagi heard a mechanical sound and thought “flaps”. The plane started to gain momentum, and Lagi was pressed into his chair. He tapped his fingers on the armrest, faster and faster like his heartbeat. The terminal whizzed past, and Lagi felt the plane lift. He watched the buildings grow smaller – with a strange feeling in the bottom of his belly – until they were nothing more than tiny models.

Then Lagi heard a voice over the intercom. “Tālofa lava. This is captain Manu Ioane, with first

officer Tony Thompson. On behalf of the crew, I’d like to say a special welcome to our gold customers – and also to my little uso, Tigi’ilagi.”

The captain kept talking, but Lagi was distracted by the glow in his chest. It seemed to spread to every part of him.

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“And the captain knew that my name means ‘reach for the sky,’” Lagi told the other kids a week later, when his holiday was over. A smile erupted across his face. “He said it was the perfect name for a pilot.” The boys all looked impressed.

“Tigi-‘i-lagi!” he said, the slow vowels as delicious as a mango.



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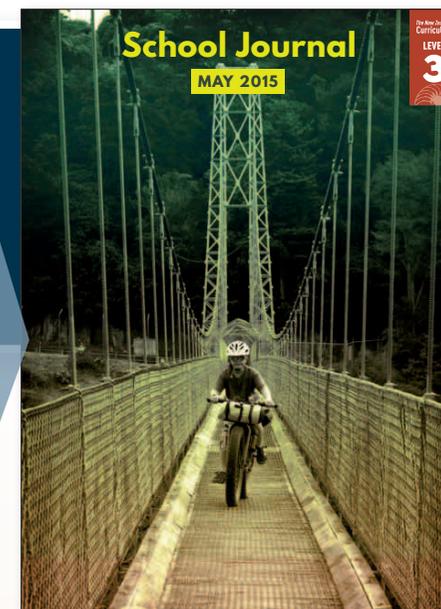
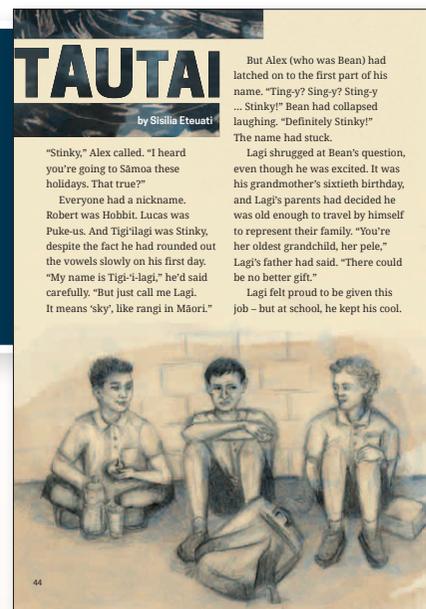
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