

U-TURN

by ANAHERA GILDEA

My mother is big. I don't mean big in size – I mean big in personality. She has a voice like a gong, and she says what she thinks. She also has a strong sense of justice. So when the email with the library fine arrived, Mum went nuts.

"Twenty dollars! That's outrageous! Come on, Benji. Time for a lesson in how to stand up for yourself."

I barely had my seatbelt on before we were backing down the drive. "Always meet a problem head on," Mum lectured. "That's how we honour our ancestors."

"Why don't you just pay the fine?" I asked. "That way, you wouldn't have a problem."

"Absolutely not. It's about justice." She smacked the steering wheel with the palm of her hand. "It's about what's right. It's about utu."

I balked. "Utu?" This was getting serious. "Don't freak out at the librarian, Mum. Promise? Just be nice. You don't need revenge."

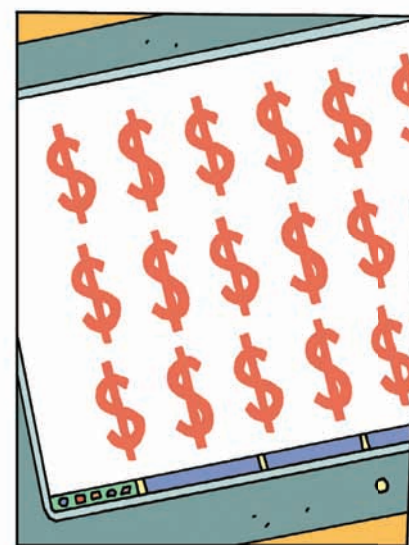
Mum clicked her tongue. "Utu isn't about revenge, son. It's about putting things right. Anyway, I'm always nice."

I said nothing.

Outside the library, Mum parked, wrenched on the handbrake, and checked her hair. "Right, let's go."

She strode straight up to the librarian. "Hello. I'd like a fine removed from my card, please."

The librarian raised a pierced eyebrow. "Let's take a look at your account."



While Mum found her library card and the librarian keyed in her number, I took my chance to disappear down the nearest aisle.

"Benjamin Raroa Hurunui!" Mum's voice rang out as if she had a loudspeaker. "Haere mai ki ahau, this instant. I'm doing this for you too."

I found that hard to believe, but I slunk back.

"That's correct," Mum was saying. "My sister had her baby early, and I had very little notice – but I asked my husband to return the books while I was away. I definitely remember that."

"Yes." The librarian looked up from the computer screen. She tried a smile. "But your husband returned them to the wrong branch, and now you owe a total of twenty dollars. You don't have to pay it all now."

Mum's nostrils flared. I took a step back.

"My husband did his best, and under the circumstances, I think you should waive the fine."

The librarian shook her head. "I'm sorry, but we can't make exceptions."

"What about a discount then?" Mum demanded.

"I'm sorry, it's a fine. We don't give discounts. That defeats the purpose."

"You do give discounts!" Mum's voice was loud enough for people to start looking over. "You've given me one before!"

"I assure you I do not give discounts," the librarian said, her face a whole lot pinker than before.

"Well obviously not you!" Now Mum was talking very loudly. Some people would call it yelling. "But I've had discounts here. Heaps of them. From heaps of people!"

The librarian's nose twitched, and the colour of her cheeks deepened. They were now almost as red as her fire-engine hair. "I'm sorry. Those are the rules."

I have no idea why people ask questions when they're mad, but they do.

"Are they?" Mum shouted. "Is that right? No discounts – is that the rules?" She had her pūkana on and was frog-stepping backwards like she might break into a haka at any second.

I grabbed Mum's arm and started pulling her towards the door.

"Come on. It doesn't matter," I begged.

"You just lost yourself a customer, lady," Mum yelled over her shoulder.

"That's right – and I'm a *big* reader."



Mum was fuming as she marched back to the car. "Get in!"

I held tight as she made a U-turn. "Where are we going now?"

"To the council. They're supposed to encourage reading. How are they going to do that if people can't pay their enormous fines?"

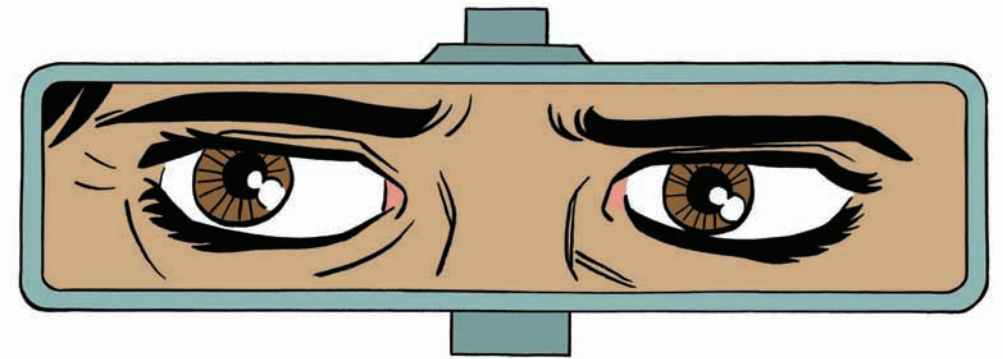
"It wasn't that enormous," I mumbled.

Mum looked at me in the rear-view mirror. She narrowed her eyes.

"What wasn't?"

"The fine." My heart was hammering, but I had to say it. "And you were really rude."

Her mouth was open to say something, but then she shut it. She drove without speaking for a minute.



"Was I?" she finally said, her voice much calmer.

"You yelled at that lady. In front of everyone."

"Well ..." Mum hesitated. "She was wrong."

"She wasn't. It was our fault. We returned the books to the wrong library, and now we have to pay the fine. There's no injustice."

Mum indicated and pulled over. We sat quietly while she thought things over. Then she put the car into gear and made another U-turn. "Actually there has been an injustice, Benji." Her face was set. "When there's a wrong, you have to right it. Otherwise things will be out of balance. That, my son, is *utu*. I haven't finished at that library."

I couldn't believe my ears. My mother was so stubborn. Sometimes she made me want to call on the ancestors myself. So there we were again, out the front of the library. We even got the same car park.

“Can I stay in the car ... *please?*” My mother gave me the look. I unbuckled my seatbelt and got out. “Seriously, Mum.” I grabbed at her sleeve. “I’ll pay the fine. I don’t mind.” I did, but I was desperate.

The librarian flinched when she saw us walk back in. I wanted to die.

“Hello,” Mum began. Her tone was unexpected. It was sort of gentle – and quiet. She pushed on. “About before. I’m sure that was awful, and I’m very sorry. I was completely out of line.”

The librarian looked surprised. “Oh. Well. Yes. It was uncomfortable. I don’t make the rules, you know.”

Mum held up her hand. “You’re right. The fine is my fault. I’m happy to pay it.” I stared at my mother like aliens might suddenly jump out of her. She paid the fine, and when we left, the librarian told her not to worry – it was just a bad day.

Bad day? Yeah, right.

On the way home, I had some questions. I was totally confused. Mum smiled. “I had a strong person stand up for what he thought was right. He reminded me about balance. That was you, Benji.”

“Duh!” I said with a grin.

“Imagine if I’d left it like that – if I hadn’t apologised. What would that have meant for the librarian? For us?”

“So all the utu stuff is balanced out now?”

“Oh, no!” Mum smiled. “Now I’m going home to have it out with your father. He owes me twenty dollars.”



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by Anahera Gildea

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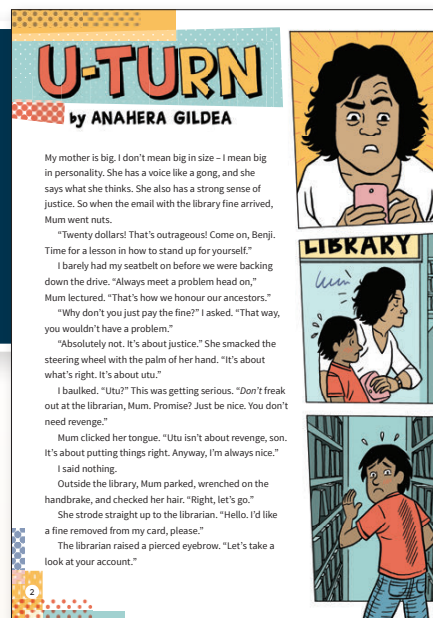
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