

Mata i Pusi

by Sisilia Eteuati

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“Little?” I'd said, not looking up from my phone.

Mum laughed. “Well, we're all a bit weird – like the way you worry about your green eyes ... or the way you like peanut butter with talo.” Mum screwed up her nose in the exact same way I did. “Who even does that?”

“Or the way you make me sing prayers in Samoan before we eat in a restaurant,” I replied. “Who even does *that*?”

“Every Samoan, you cheeky child,” Mum said.

“Stereotypes,” I muttered under my breath – though not loudly.



“Green eyes are beautiful like the sea,” Mum said at breakfast. She was obviously still thinking about last night's discussion and was trying to make me feel better.

“Your mother always has to have the last word,” Dad said. “You know that. It comes from being a lawyer. Just take the compliment.”

Nana nodded in agreement.

It was easy for Mum. She looked just like she was supposed to: brown skin, dark eyes, long black hair that she wore in a bun with a bright red flower tucked behind. When she was younger, Mum would never have been teased after church like I was. *Mata i pusi, fia Pālagi. Cat eyes, wanna be white.* And she'd never have been tongue-tied. All the retorts that came into her head would have been in Samoan. Not like with me. I thought in English, which just proved everyone's point!

It was easy for Dad too. He was Pālagi. No one expected him to look anything other than white or to speak anything other than English. I was all mixed up like a fruit salad with my light brown skin, my light brown hair, and – worst of all – my green cat eyes, which *weren't* beautiful like the sea.



“Si’aula, my darling.” Nana put her hand on my shoulder. “Clear the table. We need to start walking to school.”

I wiped the jam off my cheek with my finger and licked it in one smooth motion.

“I’m old enough to walk myself,” I said automatically.

“Va’ai lou gutu. Watch your mouth.” Nana had mastered the art of sounding both affectionate and stern at the same time. “You know I look forward to walking you to school. It’s important to get exercise at my age.” She hustled me out the door and broke into song. “Sāvalivali means go for a walk. Tautalatala means too much talk ...”

“Nana – *don’t!* People will hear.” I stalked ahead of her.

“And what if they do?” Nana called, teasing. “First you don’t want me to walk, and now you don’t want me to sing. Is there anything else your poor old nana does that embarrasses you?”

“Well,” I said, slowing down, thinking how to start this. “Alison is coming home after school.” I paused. “Can we take down the curtain over the mirror? Just the one in my room ... just for today.” The rest came tumbling out of my mouth. “The Samoan kids already tease me for being Pālagi. I don’t want the Pālagi kids to tease me for being Samoan.”

Nana looked at me with wide, sharp eyes. “You should be proud of who you are, si’aula. You are descended from great chiefs. Where do you think your mum gets her gift from?”

“Law school,” I said.

Nana snorted. “A gift like your mother’s cannot be taught. My mother – your great-grandmother – was a tulāfale, a great orator. There were many who were against her speaking. They said it was not a woman’s place. But she would weave words like other women wove fofola ‘ietōga, and such was their beauty, no one could deny her. I know the kids’ words hurt you. But your eyes have that same fearlessness in them, no matter what their colour.”

Her voice quietened. “My mother always covered the mirrors at dusk, too. I never questioned her – but I knew from my girl cousins that you must be wary of what you see in the mirror at night. It might be an aitu – a spirit. Or it might be your true self.” Nana laughed. “I’m not sure which would be scarier. But if this is important to you, then I will take the curtain down. You are old enough to decide.”



I was distracted at school. Who was my true self? The sun streamed in the window, stroking my back. I could feel its warmth through my uniform and had to fight the urge to stretch and yawn. I was hungry too. I should have had a proper breakfast. I sniffed the air delicately, cautiously. I almost imagined I could smell what people had in their bags for lunch.



That night, I curled up under my duvet to sleep, purring a little tune to myself. I thought back to what Nana had said. *It might be an aitu ... or it might be your true self.* Nana always said things that you came back to – ideas that you batted back and forth, like a cat playing with a mouse. I smiled at the strange turn of my thoughts as I drifted off to sleep.

A noise woke me. It was still the middle of the night, but moonlight streamed in through the window and bounced off the mirror. I slid out of bed, silent as a shadow. Still half asleep, I padded over to the mirror, intending to pull the curtain back across it. My eyes adjusted to the darkness. I looked into the mirror. My green, fearless mata i pusi eyes looked back at me from a cat's face.

"I should be startled," I thought, as I twitched my tail. Instead I stroked my fur and felt a deep sense of satisfaction. It was silky and luxuriant – and black.

illustrations by Leilani Isara

That afternoon, Alison and I sat on my bed, weaving friendship bracelets. There was no trace of the curtain, and I gave Nana a smile when she came to check on us. "Do you have homework?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "I'll do it tonight, even though some things can't be taught."

"Cheeky," Nana said. "Be careful. I won't give you any of the koko alaisa I'm making – and I know it's your favourite. It will all be for Alison."

Alison laughed. After Nana left, I told her about the teasing.

"I don't get it," she said. "Why are cat eyes a bad thing?"

"It's because they're green. They tease me that I look Pālagi."

"I get carrot top and freckle face," Alison said.

We grinned at each other, and I tied a final knot. "There!" I said, shyly presenting the finished bracelet. "I hope you like it."

"It's awesome," Alison said, "but now I kind of wish you'd used green."



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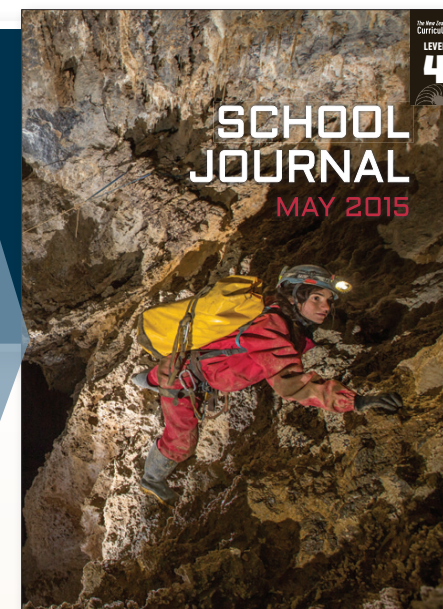
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