

WELCOME TO LULLO MARNOO BY VICTOR RODGER



When I tell people, especially Pālagi people, that my father is from Sāmoa, they usually ask, “Do you go back?”

Weird, right? It’s not like I was born in Sāmoa. I was born here, in Christchurch. Aranui, to be exact. One of those suburbs the quake messed up. If I went to Sāmoa, I wouldn’t be going *back* – I’d just be *going*. But I don’t try to explain any of this. It can get complicated.

But sometimes people, especially Samoan people, still want to know what village my father is from and other Samoan stuff. Until a month ago, I didn’t know any of this. I didn’t really know my dad full stop. I mean, I knew his name, but I couldn’t spell it. Pālagi *and* Samoan people would ask me, “How come you don’t know anything about your dad?” I’d tell them the story Mum told me: my parents were together for a bit, and then they weren’t. Pretty simple. I never met my dad when I was growing up. All I knew was that he was a student in Christchurch when he met Mum but went back to Sāmoa before I was born.

Last month, though, just as we were parking in front of our flat, I noticed a man standing outside our front door with a bucket of fried chicken. It was my father. I recognised him from the one photo we had. Mum got such a shock she almost drove into the neighbour’s rose bush! Seeing my father outside our front door was a bit freaky but also a bit exciting because if there’s one thing I love, it’s fried chicken.



The excitement didn’t last long. When we got inside and opened the bucket, it was mostly breasts and wings. Mum and my friends know I like thighs best, then drumsticks ... and that’s it. Obviously my father didn’t know this, and he took the only two thighs and drumsticks for himself.

I was pretty annoyed. When my father asked Mum if I was quiet because I was shy, she said no – I was quiet because he was eating my favourite pieces of chicken.

My father laughed. “Oi, sole,” he said, one of the few Samoan phrases I knew from all the soles at school. Then he gave me five dollars.

I’m not going to lie. In my head, I was like, is that *it*? I must’ve looked ungrateful because Mum gave me the same look I get when she catches me on my phone in church. So I said thank you. That’s how I was raised – to be polite, no matter what, even when your father’s kind of stingy and takes all the thighs and drumsticks for himself.

After we’d eaten, my parents went outside for a talk. I was left in the kitchen with three piles of chicken bones. When they came back, I had a question. I wanted to know the name of my father’s village. He said it really fast, so I wasn’t sure I heard right, but it sounded like Lullo Marnoo. Then he said he had a surprise. He’d bought us tickets to Sāmoa so I could meet my Samoan grandmother. She wasn’t well and wanted to see me.

Mum was drinking a glass of water, and she started choking and sprayed it all over him. I guess she was surprised, too. My father wiped the water off his face, smiled, and said I would see Lullo Marnoo for myself – real soon – then left.

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A Pālagi man wearing a patterned shirt with big red flowers sat next to us on the plane. When I told him my father was Samoan, he said, “So, you’re going back?”

I shook my head. “No. I’m *going*.”

The man looked confused. I don’t think he got it.

When we got off the plane, the heat felt like someone had wrapped me in a duvet on the hottest day of summer. Sāmoa was hotter than anywhere I’d ever been. We got through customs, and my father was there in the arrivals lounge, wearing a singlet and lāvalava and jandals. He looked down at Mum’s high heels and chuckled. “Forget to pack your jandals?”

Mum rolled her eyes.

We got into his ute, me in the middle. I guess we looked like any other family – even though we weren’t. My father put on some reggae, then we headed to Lullo Marnoo.

I could tell Mum was a bit on edge. Everything seemed different, but that’s what made it interesting. As we drove along, you could see right into the fales. Sometimes I caught a glimpse of people watching TV on giant screens. When we drove through Apia, I saw a billboard that said “Supa seki”. I asked my father about it. He smiled and explained it meant really awesome.

“Do you think Sāmoa is supa seki, Michael?” he asked.

I shrugged. I wasn’t sure yet.

Finally, we arrived at my father’s village. “Welcome to Lullo Marnoo,” he said – or that’s what I thought he said, until I saw a sign on the side of the road that spelled it Lalomanu.

We drove up to a house right beside the sea. Outside the house, there was a grave with kids sitting on it. “That’s where my dad’s buried,” said my father.

The kids stared when we got out of the ute. As we followed my father towards the house, I heard them talking. The only word I could pick out was “Pālagi”.

Mum smiled at them. “Yes, that’s right. I’m a Pālagi.”

My father laughed and looked at Mum. “They’re not talking about you.” Then I realised they were talking about *me*!

It was cool inside the house. Quiet too. The only noise we could hear was the sound of the sea and those kids on the grave, still talking. In the lounge, an old lady sat on a couch. My father said something in Samoan, and her face lit up.

“Michael,” he said, turning to me. “This is your grandmother Loloama.”

I smiled at my grandmother, but she didn’t seem to see me. Her eyes were really pale, a bit like Storm’s in X-Men when she makes a hurricane.

“Mum’s got cataracts,” my father explained.

I wasn’t sure what cataracts were, but they sounded serious.



“She can’t really see. Why don’t you go sit next to her?”

I looked over at Mum, who nodded, then I took a deep breath and sat on the couch. I smiled but remembered my grandmother couldn’t see, so I stopped. She put her hand on mine and gripped it tight. I looked down. Her hand was so much darker than mine, almost the same way Mum likes her tea. Just black. Mine was the colour of hot chocolate made with heaps of milk.

My grandmother spoke in Samoan, and my father translated. “Mum says she’s so happy to meet you, Michael. And so glad you’re finally here in Lalomanu.” Then she began to touch my face, which was a bit freaky, but I got used to it. She ran her hand over my cheeks and nose and forehead. Finally, she held my chin and said something to my father.

“She says you are a handsome boy, Michael.”

My grandmother began to cry. It was pretty awks.

“Why’s she crying?” I asked my father.

“Because she’s happy to finally meet you,” he said. Then *he* started to cry. Double awks. I looked over to Mum ... and you guessed it. Triple awks!

It was silent again apart from the sea. After a while, everyone wiped their tears and my grandmother spoke to my father again.

“Mum says it’s time to eat,” he said. “You must be starving after your plane ride.”

My grandmother had that right – I was starving!

Mum and I helped her over to a big wooden table, and my father appeared with a huge oven tray covered with foil. He took off the foil, and underneath was chicken. A whole tray of just thighs and drumsticks!

“What do you think about that, Michael?” my father asked.

I looked at my grandmother and my father and mother. Then I looked at the chicken.

“Supa seki,” I said.



illustrations by Scott Pearson

Welcome to Lullo Marnoo

by Victor Rodger

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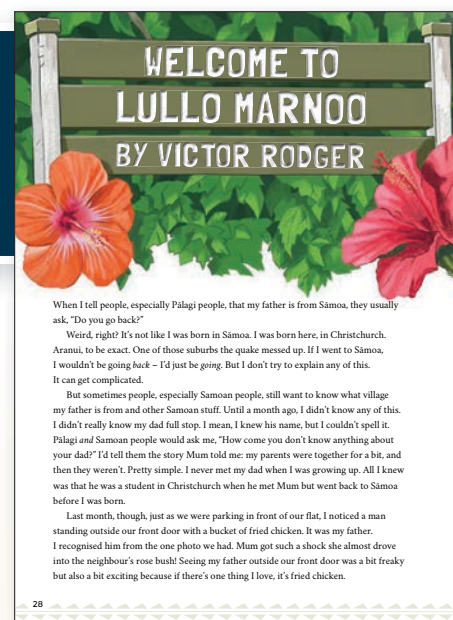
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