



GOOD LITTLE SAMOAN BOY

BY VICTOR
RODGER

I met my Samoan grandmother, Matalena, twice: once when I was at primary school and once when I was at high school. Both times it was pretty awkward. Even though I knew who she was, I didn't know her.

The second – and last – time I met Matalena, she'd developed cataracts and could hardly see. She wept as she ran her hands over my face – and to be honest, it freaked me out.

Part of me thinks I look ridiculous, especially in those platform jandals. Another part of me recognises there's something else I appear to be: uncomplicated.

In 1977, when I was seven, my Pālagi mum took a photo of me for my grandmother who lived in Sāmoa. Mum wanted her to know she was raising a good little Samoan boy even though she was Pālagi and even though my father – Matalena's son – wasn't around. So Mum dressed me up the way she thought a good little Samoan boy should look.

In the photo, I'm shirtless. "Husky" as they used to say. A junior Poly-Buddha with a fringe. A thick shell necklace has been wrapped once around my neck, like a choker, the rest left to dangle in between my nipples. My hands cover my puku – whether by self-conscious design or unconscious coincidence, I'm not sure. My tongue pokes out like a smiley pūkana.

I'm wearing a lāvalava for the first time (a gift from Matalena that she made herself, I later learnt). It's watermelon coloured and features geometric designs in black and brown. I didn't know how to tie it properly. Neither did Mum. We held it together with safety pins. The ensemble is finished off with my mother's chunky black-and-silver platform jandals, which were popular in the 1970s. They snugly fit my wide seven-year-old feet.

For me, it's like playing dress-ups. Putting this attire on is no different from putting on a cowboy outfit or a pirate eyepatch. And like those costumes, the good little Samoan boy

is something I can put on and take off when I feel like it.

At the time Mum took the photo, I hadn't ever thought about what it meant to have Samoan heritage. Whenever I occasionally met a Samoan relative, I found their names hard to say and their accents difficult to understand. I couldn't get away fast enough. There was always a level of discomfort – and that was never more true than on the times my father made one of his rare appearances. The emotions he stirred up in me were dark and complicated. None of them were positive. Not yet, anyway.

I look at this photo over forty-five years later, and I wonder what Matalena thought when she saw it for the first time. Did she smile sadly and sigh, "Kalofa e"? Did she laugh at the platform jandals? Or was she moved? Did she understand the effort my young Pālagi mother made to try to prove that her fatherless son was still somehow a "tama Sāmoa" – a son of Sāmoa?

Matalena died a long time ago. Whatever happened to her copy of the photo? Does it still exist? Part of me thinks I look ridiculous, especially in those platform jandals. Another part of me recognises there's something else I appear to be: uncomplicated.

It will be a decade or so before I wear another lāvalava. By then, I'm starting to embrace my Samoan heritage, but that's precisely when things start to get complicated.

By the late 1980s, I'm a cadet reporter on a newspaper, fresh out of high school. I'm the only brown face among the reporters. I proudly answer the phone each day with "Talofa, newsroom".

When a story is published about a Samoan taxi driver in Wellington being told off for wearing a lāvalava to work, I decide to show my idea of Samoan solidarity: I put on a lāvalava in the men's bathroom and walk into the newsroom.

One of the Pālagi photographers is amused. "How'd you tie it?" he asks as he lifts his camera and gets ready to take my photo.

I feel myself blush. "Safety pins."

On one level, I'm still the boy in the photo Mum took in 1977, though this time, I've elected to display my Samoan-ness rather than being told what to wear.

The photographer looks disappointed. He puts his camera down and doesn't take my photo. Maybe he's thinking the exact same thing I'm thinking in that moment: bad Samoan.

Some people think it's ironic I chose to embrace my Samoan heritage given my father left my Pālagi mother to raise me by herself. But it makes sense to me. I've had a lifetime of Pālagi people asking "Where are you from?" and then, once I reveal my Samoan heritage, asking "Do you go back?"

Well, yes. I went to Sāmoa for the first time just before I turned twelve, only I wasn't going back. I was *going*. There's a big difference.

Thinking about it now, my upbringing was the reasonably common story of the Afakasi outsider: too brown for white people, too white for brown people – both sides ready to tell you what you were and, more to the point, what you were not.

My father didn't believe in the concept of being half-caste (a term I no longer use, even though I still sometimes use the Samoan equivalent – Afakasi).

"You're either one or the other," he insisted. This was back in the eighties when we were trying to establish something that resembled a relationship.

Was he right, all those years ago? Do those of us who have parents of different races need to choose one side over the other?

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I'm still one of those Samoans whose heart begins to beat with fear when *that* song comes on at a function ... you know the one? The one that means you'll have to aiuli your cousin/mate/relative/whoever when they're up there doing a siva. When you're going to have to pretend you're swaying unselfconsciously to the music while everyone else looks so free, but you feel like a total unco with arms of lead.

It's all there in my first play, *Sons*. I wrote the play in 1994, partly to represent my place on the Samoan spectrum – the place that has no language, no knowledge of the culture, yet with a deep desire to somehow belong.

The main character in *Sons* is Noah, a young Afakasi Samoan-Pālagi who knows nothing about his Samoan heritage. His half-brother Lua is aware of this (but unaware they are half-brothers). Lua ropes Noah into doing a dance at a Samoan fundraiser. It's a set-up: to get one over the clueless Afakasi. Noah dances, despite his reservations. He's terrible.

The scene is played for comedy.

On the opening night of *Sons*, the MC called me onto the stage after the play had finished. Not to take a bow. To dance.

And so there I was, dancing, in utter silence. My auntie Leitu'u got up to aiuli me. Everyone else in the audience sat there and watched in a gaping, uncomfortable silence that felt like it went on forever.

Life imitated art. And it *sucked*.

But as I've come to learn, it's all just part of the journey, where bits of it *really* suck but those bits are far outweighed by the other bits; the bits that bring joy and, yes, a sense of belonging. Because even though my fair-skinned face may not be the face of Sāmoa, it is a face of Sāmoa – just as all the other faces like mine are faces of Sāmoa in our different ways. Some of us even write plays, like I did, that deal with cultural identity or racism.

And while I never grew up to become the good little Samoan boy my mother dressed up all those years ago, I have, in my own way, embraced being a tama Sāmoa.

I think Matalena, if she were still alive, would appreciate that. And I like to think it would make her smile ...

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Good Little Samoan Boy

by Victor Rodger



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