

Aunties

by Maria Samuela



MONDAY

Aunty Moeroa arrives in the morning. She smothers me at the front door, pulling me tight against her chest. “Auē,” she cries. “You’re growing too fast!” She pinches my cheek like I’m three years old and disappears into the sitting room. The house is packed. The aunties are in the kitchen, making food for later. The uncles are outside with Dad. They’re digging an umu pit for Friday. Uncle Tiare has built a table from old crates and a plank so they’ll have a place to prep the meat.

I open tins of corned beef while Aunty Moeroa dishes out orders. “Dust those ornaments on the mantelpiece,” she tells Selina, my younger cousin. “Esther, you can scrub the toilet and mop the bathroom floor. We need clean sheets on the beds. And someone vacuum the hall.” Aunty Teina slices the bread, and I stack the slices in two towers that lean to one side.

Aunty Moeroa brings out the mat from Mum and Dad’s bedroom, the good one we use for visitors. We lay it in front of the couch so my cousins have somewhere to sit during the rosary. “Your mum’s favourite,” she tells me, smoothing down the edges. She admires the geometric patterns, the intricate weaving. “We made this when she was pregnant with you. Isn’t that right, sis?” Once aunty leaves the room, my cousins sit on the mat, cross-legged in a circle to play last card. Mum said that she and her sisters used to play cards sitting like that, too.

There’s a big fuss in the hallway. Aunty Api’i and Uncle Jacob are finally here with their seven kids. Aunty Api’i pulls me towards her. She soaks the crook of my neck with her tears. “Look at you!” she cries. “So big.” The last time she saw me I was barely nine. I’m taller now – but I know what she means. I’m growing into a woman. I tug at my jersey, pulling it away from my chest.

By the time Aunty Akaiti gets here, the last of Mum’s sisters, we’re about to start the rosary. “Not a child any more!” she gushes, looking me up and down. My cheeks redden even though Aunty Akaiti is my favourite.

The sitting room’s full of relatives. Heaps of them have caught the bus from South Auckland. I sit at the front for the rosary beside Mum and her sisters. When it’s my turn to lead the Hail Marys, I concentrate on the words, speaking slowly and clearly like Mum taught me.

TUESDAY

Aunty Api'i and Aunty Akaiti are at the kitchen table, sheets of newspaper spread in front of them. They're laughing and telling stories about Mum and the olden days. Aunty Akaiti rips open a sack of potatoes. "Help us peel the spuds, darling," she says to me, nodding towards a chair.

"Sister!" Aunty Api'i calls to Mum. "Where are all your peelers?"

"We only have one, Aunty," I say. I find a peeler and two knives in the cutlery drawer. Then I pull a handful of potatoes from the sack and sit down and start to peel. Long strips of skin fall in clumps. To keep away the memories, I focus on making a single strip as long as I can.

"You lose," Mum says.

I look up. My aunts aren't there any more; it's just Mum and me. She's smiling. She holds her hand high to show off a long, trailing piece of skin. Mine has snapped and dropped on the paper.

"It's easy when you have a peeler," I say. "Using a knife takes skill." I start another strip. It's good to see Mum happy again.

"Gentle, baby," she says. I press the knife as light as I can, making strips so fine I can see through them.

"Oh," Aunty Api'i teases. "Look at our niece, showing off her spud skills."

Mum's back in the sitting room.



WEDNESDAY

Uncle Jacob has hung the pigs on the clothesline, carefully spaced to balance the weight. The blood has stopped dripping, but the grass is still red. I watch Dad out the kitchen window. He's wearing his old rugby jersey, the one Mum hates. He looks tired.

Inside, the house is bustling. Aunty Moeroa has us on chores again. I'm meant to be vacuuming, but the vacuum cleaner is kept in Mum and Dad's room, and I haven't been in there since Sunday night. Instead, I grab the kika broom from the cupboard to sweep the rooms. I can hear the aunts in the kitchen, making mainese.

"Cut the potato cubes the same size," Mum would tell me. "Not too big. People want a bit of everything with each bite." Mum always said it was important to take time mixing the potato through all the other vegetables. We'd put the ingredients in her big silver bowl – peas, carrots, beetroot, potatoes – and turn them carefully with the wooden spoon. But the real secret was the dressing. Mum showed me how to drip-feed the oil into the egg yolks, then beat it to perfection. She always made the creamiest dressing. The superglue, she called it.

Later that night, we settle in the sitting room for evening prayers. Flowers in vases and buckets and those little cardboard boxes from the florist fill the room with their sweet smell. I sit between Mum and her sisters. For the third night in a row, the house is packed. Mum's mat is filled with my cousins. Her coffin, open again so we can say goodbye, is at the head of the room where everyone can see. She's the superglue, holding us together.



THURSDAY

The day before Mum's funeral, everything runs like clockwork. It's good to keep busy, to have a house full of people. Keeps me from thinking.

That evening in the bathroom, I notice blood in my underpants. Mum had promised she'd be there when my time came, that she'd show me what to do. I sit on the toilet seat, feeling the heat rise in my face. Angry tears land on my cheeks. Soon my shoulders are shaking. My sobbing is so loud I don't hear my aunties knocking. They wait for me to come out, but I ignore them when I do. I go straight to Mum and Dad's bedroom. I open the drawer where Mum keeps her sanitary pads. Buried beneath them is a small, woven basket. I recognise the geometric patterns around the rim. They're the same as the ones on the mat – the one Mum wove with her sisters thirteen years ago.

I run my fingers over the basket, feeling the dry, plaited flax. Then I pry it open. Inside are Mum's keepsakes: a pair of booties, a lock of hair, the first card I made for Mother's Day. At the bottom of the basket is a photograph. It shows me and Mum the day I was christened. There's no one else in the photo, just us. I'm wearing a long, white gown. I look like a baby princess.

"Your mum was the best seamstress in the family," Aunty Api'i says over my shoulder. All of my aunties have come into the room.

"Excuse me?" says Aunty Moeroa. "But I supervised the making of that gown." She turns to me. "I taught your mother how to sew. That's how she got so good."

The aunties start bickering about who taught who what and who's the best at mainese and who was Papa's favourite daughter, and it makes me laugh so hard my belly hurts. But when Aunty Akaiti notices the sanitary pads, I stop.

"It's OK, girl," she says, putting her arm round me. "We're here."

We decide to bury Mum with her keepsakes. That night, I sleep in the sitting room with her one last time. I tuck the photo of us under my pillow.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY LEILANI ISARA

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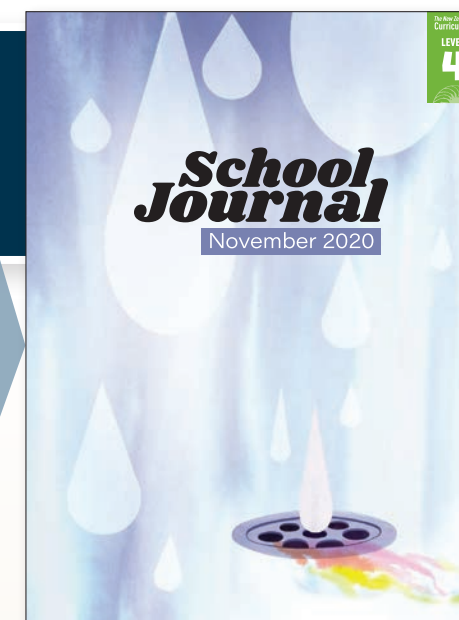
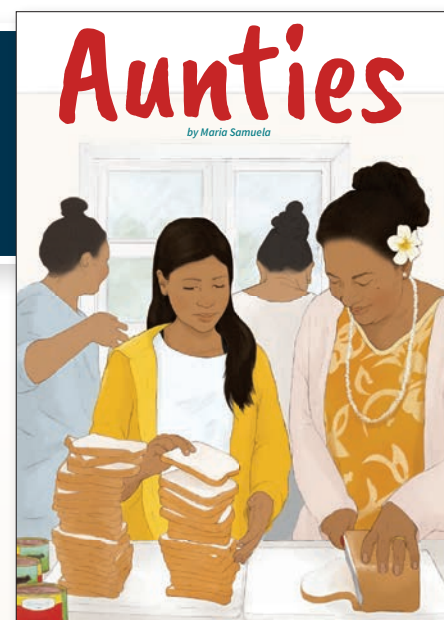
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