



FRESH

by Amy McDaid

When my friend Lana went to Rarotonga, she brought home shells and a plastic album filled with photos. There were photos of her in a turquoise lagoon and photos of dogs trying to catch fish. I couldn't imagine my māmā swimming in those lagoons when she was a girl. I couldn't imagine her as a girl at all.

I told Māmā about Lana's holiday. She said we should go on a beach trip, too. She wanted to go to Point Chev. "You don't need a plane to get there," she said. "You can pick me up on the way."

My māmā doesn't dress like other people's grandmothers. She always looks like she's off to a fancy restaurant. She came out of the house wearing purple flared trousers and a blouse. Her black leather shoes had big heels, and her dark hair was piled high on her head like a beehive. She carried a big umbrella, her handbag, and a blue chilly bag.

"Have the children been behaving, Agnes?" she asked Mum as she climbed into the car. It was her usual question.

Mum turned and gave us a wink. "Of course," she said. "They always behave." Māmā looked doubtful and clicked her teeth.

We were surprised to get a park right by the beach. Point Chev is super-busy on the weekends. Most of the time, you have to park miles away. We got our stuff from the boot and followed the path through the pōhutukawa.



When we saw the beach, we realised why we'd got the park. The tide was way out, and beyond the thin strip of brown-looking sand was a lot of mud. The rubbish bins were overflowing, and a bunch of seagulls were fighting over some chips on the grass. Worst of all, the air smelt like a long drop.

"Isn't this lovely," said Mum, wrinkling her nose.

"It's yuck," said Micha. "And there's no water."

Mum squinted. "I can see some. You just need to walk out a bit."

"That's the shipping lane," I said. "We'll get hit by a boat."

Māmā clicked her teeth. "Your mother's right. Be a good girl and take your brother out. He wants to paddle."

"I *don't* want to paddle," Micha said. He began to cry.

To make things worse, a big family arrived. A big, *happy* family. There were adults and teenagers and little kids and babies. The women had flowers in their hair, and the kids had a cricket set and a rugby ball. They were noisy.

I suggested we move down the beach, but Mum said that would be rude. They might think we're avoiding them.

"But we are," I whispered.

"Emily!" Māmā said. "E Kūki 'Āirani, rātou. They're Cook Islanders."

I hadn't heard Māmā speak Māori Kūki 'Āirani for a while. When Mum was young, people decided it was better to speak English. She never really learnt her language – and neither did we. So how was I meant to know?

I left Micha digging in the sand and walked out to the water. Maybe being hit by a boat wouldn't be so bad. My feet sank deep in the mud. Quicksand! Even better. Mum and Māmā would look out and see my lonely red sunhat lying there. That would teach them.

When I turned to see if anyone was watching, Mum waved me in. She was with one of the men from the noisy group. Did she want me to swim or not?



“No swimming,” the man said when I got back, “or you’ll spend the rest of the week on the pōtera, and you won’t enjoy that!” He showed us a website called Safeswim. We could see little red crosses all over the city.

“My cuz was swimming here the other day,” he said. “You’ll never guess what he saw floating past.”

We *could* guess.

“Meitaki ma’ata,” said Māmā after we told her what the man had said.

“We’ll still enjoy the day.”

Māmā said she might have a nap before we ate lunch. She lay with the sun on her legs and her face in the shade – her favourite position. “You kids go for a walk,” she said. “I don’t want you waking me.”

“Good idea,” said Mum, reaching for her book. “Don’t go too far.”

I rinsed my muddy feet under the tap, then helped Micha drop mouldy shells in his bucket. He was happy – he liked collecting things – but what was the point of a beach where you couldn’t swim?

The next thing was the noisy family set up a speaker. A fast type of ukulele music blasted out. The seagulls took off, squawking, and Māmā got up and stood between their mat and ours with her hands on her hips. “This will teach them,” I thought. I looked away. I don’t like a scene.

“Tāku vaiata, kāore atu ei!” Māmā shouted.

“Ura!” some of them shouted back.

They all laughed. Then – I couldn’t believe it – Māmā lifted her hands and began to dance. The others started clapping and whooping and cheering, which only encouraged her to carry on.

After a minute, Māmā pulled Mum up to dance. Mum thought she had some good moves, too. I could guess what would happen next and ran.

“Aere mai, Emily,” Māmā shouted.

“Micha, you too. Come and ‘ura!”

Micha came and got me. He grabbed my hand and pulled me over. I stood there, super-awkward, wishing I could disappear.

“Not like that!” Māmā said, not that I was even trying. She grabbed my hips in her strong brown hands and showed me how to move them while I kept my arms and torso still. By then, everyone was dancing.

“It’s just like home!” Māmā shouted above the music. I looked around at the disappointing beach and back at my grandmother. She was still laughing.

It’s hard to explain, but the music kind of got inside me after that. I actually *wanted* to dance. Besides, everyone else was dancing. It would’ve been more embarrassing to just sit there.



Eventually we collapsed on the mat, hot and exhausted. While we danced, the sea had crept back in. The beach almost looked pretty with the sun reflecting off the water. If only we could swim! I noticed a few of the adults looking out with sad expressions.

Mum put her hand on my knee. “Shameful, isn’t it?”

Māmā nodded in agreement. She unzipped her chilly bag and pulled out a big container of ika mata. Tiny cubes of fish, chopped cucumber, and red onion floated in thick coconut cream. “‘Ē reka te kai,” Māmā said. “I made our favourite. And there’s some bread ... and a watermelon.”

The family next door were eating, too. They’d cooked sausages on a grill.

“Māmā?” I said.

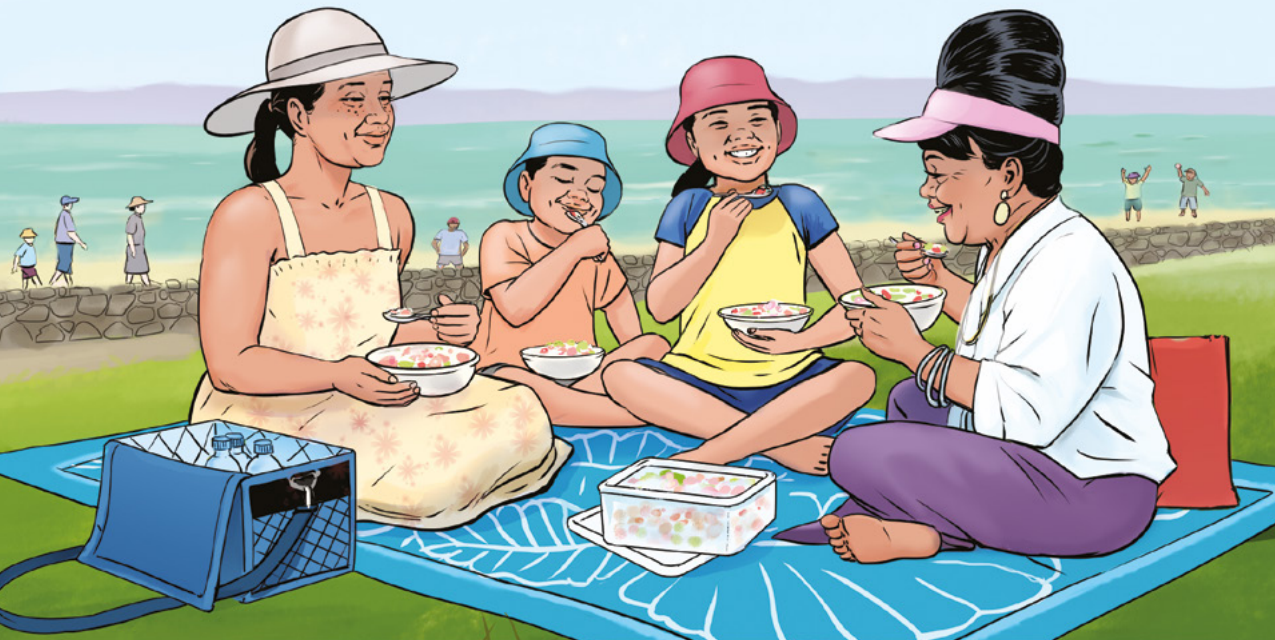
She looked at me suspiciously. It must’ve been the way I said her name. “Yes, Emily?” she said.

“I like it when you speak your language. And dancing suits you.”

“Auē! Cheeky girl.” She tried to look cross, but I could see her lips twitch, and instead of clicking her teeth, she pulled my ear.

There was enough ika mata to share with our neighbours. Everyone said it was the best fish they’d ever tasted. I agreed. It tasted fresh – like how the ocean should be.

illustrations by Andrew Burdan



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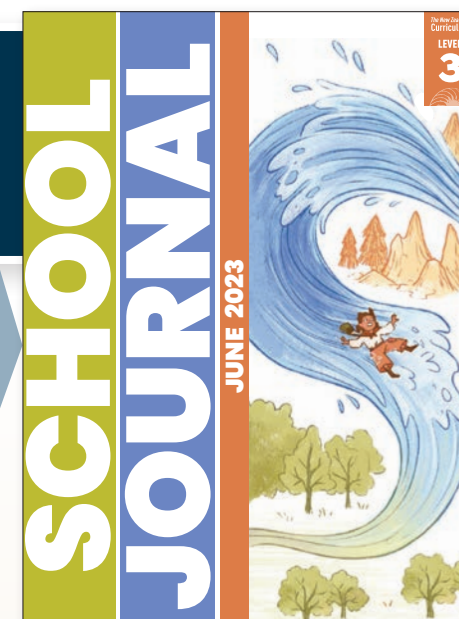
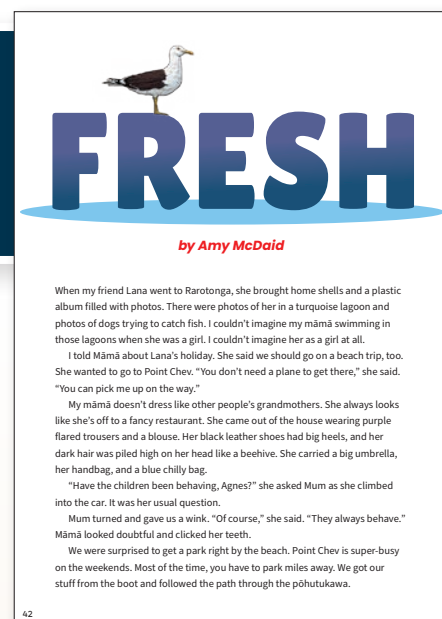
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