

## *'The Confessions of a Samoan Woman with Obligations'*

By Maryanne Peniamina

My eyes travel down the seating chart, spotting Claudia and I's seats towards the front near the bride and groom's table. *Great.* My chances of going completely unnoticed have narrowed down to slim to none. I inspect the rest of our table, and I mutter small profanities under my breath. I glance at Claudia and try to give her a comforting smile, but it falters.

I begrudgingly lead the way to our table.

'Raven,' someone shouts behind.

I peer over my shoulder and relief washes over me. My sister, Ava. Stopping in our tracks to allow her to catch up, she is quick to pull us aside out of earshot.

'You're brave,' she starts, looking between Claudia and I pointedly, 'you know this is just going to give everyone more ammunition. Mum and Dad won't be happy.'

I roll my eyes at her. 'What? Just because I brought a friend to our cousin's wedding? The invite said close family were entitled to a plus one.'

She scoffs but it is quickly replaced with a pitiful stare as she acknowledges our rigid state. 'I'm just trying to look out for you,' she flickers to Claudia, 'for the both of you.'

Claudia shoots her a thankful smile.

'Well, you can start by telling Issac that you'll both swap seats with us,' I say, looking at my sister pleadingly.

Her brows furrowed, and I nodded in the direction of our table.

I hear the intake of a breath, 'I love you so much sister but hell no.'

My aunty Sina sits lonesome when we arrive at our table.

'Aunty Sina,' I greet while going in for a hug, 'it's been so long.'

'My beautiful Raven, look at you,' she exclaims while giving me a once over, 'oh, my goodness, dear.'

*Here it comes.*

‘You’ll need to eat all our mea’ai,’ shaking her head in disapproval, ‘you’re too skinny.’

*There it is.*

Samoans, both men and women, are typically quite big boned. There was no shame in it; that’s just how our families were.

‘Tsk tsk tsk, you don’t look healthy at all. Your Mum was right,’ she says.

I visibly wince at her words. Unfortunately for me, I struggled to put on weight, and it was a constant reminder from my family.

*‘You need to eat more Raven.’*

*‘People are going to think we’re not feeding you Raven.’*

*‘Is that all you’re eating Raven, no wonder you’re so thin.’*

I remember it beginning from the ripe age of twelve and it stuck like a shadow at the age of twenty-four. I used to believe it would never bother me, that I was stronger than their words. That sitting consistently at fifty-five kilos was healthy, but I started lying about my ethnicity, about who I was, just to avoid the stares and the comments.

*‘You’re so skinny for a Samoan.’*

I heard it repeatedly and it began to echo inside me. I could never escape their criticism, not even in my own reflection.

I laugh off her comments, ‘I am Auntie Sina,’ giving her a weak smile, ‘I’ll make sure to load my ipu up.’

We settle back into our seats as Sina and Claudia begin their introductions to each other. I tense seeing our next guest for the table.

‘Well, well, well,’ my Uncle Iakopo says as he takes a seat across from me.

*Here it comes.*

‘Little Raven finally graces us with her presence,’ he says.

*There it is.*

Sina laughs and slaps her husband's chest playfully. I give a tight-lipped smile towards him.

‘Here I am,’ I say.

‘How long are you here for?’

‘Just for the weekend.’

He lets out a condescending sneer.

‘What, so you move away and think that you can just drop by when you please. How selfish of you. Your poor matua, you’re supposed to be looking after them.’

My mouth goes dry at the attack.

‘Fa’afilemu Iakopo,’ Sina says.

The couple start to bicker between themselves as Sina shoots me an apologetic stare. I smile back gratefully, but I know she thinks no different to him.

I left to escape all the expectations thrust upon me. I needed a way out of life that was normal for my family, because it felt like the start of my own demise. The thought of staying, confined to this small town where every corner revealed my family and their routines, almost sent me into orbit.

It was normal in our culture to reside with your parents in your late twenties. Being the youngest of six made it even harder, my parents clung tighter, and the weight of them letting go engulfed me.

I still remember the day I told them I was leaving like it was yesterday. I refused to leave my room unless absolutely necessary, barricading myself against the brewing storm. Their emotional assault came in waves, petty arguments, glares that pierced my skin, and the silent treatment that stretched for days but it only pushed me further out the door. No amount of shame or fury could keep me where they wanted me. I was desperate because I felt the walls of my life closing in on me under their roof, and all I could see was freedom waiting beyond them.

I clear my throat, silencing the couple.

‘I know Uncle Iakopo, but I plan on visiting every month now. I’m coming home for Christmas and will stay for at least the whole month,’ I say.

He nods in approval, ‘good, as you should.’

I swallow my pride and retort at the tip of my tongue.

In my peripheral, I noticed Claudia looking at me in anger. We were meant to spend Christmas with her family.

‘Where is Alofa?’ I question the whereabouts of their daughter.

‘Right here,’ she says as she swoops down to kiss me on the cheek, ‘and you brought a friend,’ smiling warmly at Claudia. ‘How long are you here for?’

‘Just the weekend, I couldn’t get the time off work.’

‘You couldn’t get time off?’

*Here it comes.*

‘How do you not get time off from writing books? Can you not just do it from your computer. It’s not like you go into an office like a real job,’ she says.

*There it is.*

‘It still baffles me to this day that you gave up on your law degree when you had one year left,’ she says.

The same law degree which wounded me up in psychiatric care. The same degree that my parents clutched onto like it was my only choice; the one they demanded I chase, because everything I aspired for, creating and writing, was never good enough for them.

My parents couldn’t comprehend the turmoil that degree caused me, and when I was diagnosed with severe depression, their attitude worsened. To them, I was ungrateful for the life I had, blind to the roof over my head, the food on the table, because it was the life they had fought so hard to give me, a life they never got to live. I was always grateful, their work never going unnoticed, but their sacrifices, in their mind, left me trapped in a world where my suffering was dismissed, my pain was invisible, and my own dreams diminished.

‘It just wasn’t for me,’ I say.

She dismisses the subject completely, ‘will there be a man joining you next time,’ she says suggestively. Before I can answer, Claudia excuses herself from the table.

Claudia stands alone in the lobby.

‘I thought I could do this Raven, but I can’t,’ Claudia says.

‘It’s fine, it’s only today,’ I say.

‘But it’s not. It’s the rest of our lives. Do you know how hard it was to keep quiet in there while you got slandered by your own family. How hard it is to act like we’re just friends.’

‘I know honey, I know. I will tell them eventually, just not this weekend. I promise.’

‘It’s been almost two years Raven.’

‘I know but I also know that I can’t imagine my life without you so I will have to tell them regardless.’

She lets out a defeated sigh, and I pull her in for a comforting kiss.

If only it was that easy.

A sharp gasp cuts through the room, as I’m violently yanked from Claudia’s arms.

It comes before I can register. My head whips to the side, and I recoil from the force. The hand which once used to cradle my cheek in comfort is gone, now replaced by the metallic sting of blood on my tongue. Tears threaten to spill as the harsh warmth spreads on my skin.

*Here it comes.*

‘No daughter of mine will be with a teine,’ she spits at me.

‘But mum-’

‘No, how dare you bring her here.’

‘Mum, please.’

‘You are an embarrassment to our aiga.’

I always knew that’s what everyone thought of me, but nothing could prepare me to hear it aloud.

I was too skinny.

I moved away.

I didn’t succeed in my career.

I struggled with my mental health.

I was dating a woman.

I wasn’t fa’a Samoa enough.

I was an embarrassment to my family, and nothing could change that.

‘You both need to leave now,’ I flinch at my mum’s tone.

‘But-’

‘Leave,’ she redirects her attention to Claudia and points, ‘and only come back when you are done with this nonsense.’

*There it is.*

