

FAR FROM HOME

BY HEIDI WANG, KOHIA TERRACE SCHOOL • WINNER OF THE ELSIE LOCKE WRITING PRIZE 2020



Maddison was picking at her salad again. The lettuce, once crispy and green, had gone yellow and mushy from her fork's constant prodding. The carton of milk lay undrunk, and her orange was only half finished. The rest of the kids were playing hopscotch or tag with their friends. No one bothered to pay any attention to the figure hunched in the pōhutukawa tree. Occasionally, a pair of curious eyes would skim over the new girl, but no one invited her to play with them – or even said hi. Despite how thick-skinned Maddison appeared to be, after a month of this frosty behaviour, she felt hurt.

Mary, Maddison's mum, was planting kūmara in the backyard when Maddison's clumpy school shoes appeared next to the weed pile. "How was school?" she asked.

"Fine," Maddison muttered.

Mary huffed. "Come on, Maddie. Don't speak to me like that." Maddison didn't answer, and her mum sighed. It had been hard moving, but she had hoped her daughter would have started to enjoy her new school by now.

Mary tried again. "Honey, I'm sorry those girls at school are being mean to you, but we can't help being different. Grandma said she's going to try and call, but she's having trouble with the Interweb."

Maddison smiled at the memory of her crazy grandmother, but her smile faded at the thought of homework. "I'm gonna try to make a dent in our assignment," she said.

Mary's hopeful look slipped as she watched her daughter trudge to the house. Children could be so frustrating sometimes!

Maddison had barely written three words when her mother appeared at her bedroom door. "She's done it!" exclaimed Mary. "Grandma's connected."

Ignoring her work, Maddison flung herself to Mary's side as they accepted the call. "Grandma!" Maddison cried.

A beaming, wrinkly face with blue eyeshadow appeared on the phone. "Maryanne, you've cut Maddison's hair too short again!" Grandma grumbled.

Laughing, Maddison kissed the screen.

"So, what have my favourite girls been up to? Is New Zealand gorgeous? Is school great? Maryanne, how's your new job?" demanded Grandma. Maddison was about to give a cheery reply but felt her voice seizing up. "Maddison, is everything all right?" Grandma asked in a softer tone.

Maddison swallowed to get rid of the large lump in her throat.

"It's been lonely. No one will hang out with me just because I look different. The teachers are nice, but if a student comes too close, they get a funny look on their face, and ..." Maddison couldn't continue. She blinked hard. "I just hate being weird."

Grandma scoffed. "So what? Be weird and proud of it! Can you imagine a world where everyone was the same? If someone is being horrible just because of your skin colour, then they're not worthy of your attention, so don't let them affect you!"

Maddison opened her mouth and closed it again. What more was to be said? "Thanks, Grams," was all she could choke out.

"Just remember, Maddison. You're as good as any of those other students." Smiling, the old lady was just about to say something else when the screen went blank.

"Out of power," Mary laughed. "She's having trouble using her tablet again."

Maddison smiled. "You know what, Mum? I don't care about those people any more. Grandma's right. Everyone is different, and that's what makes us special! I don't care that my skin's green."

Mary whooped. "That's the spirit! When we next visit Zentoun, you'll have great stories to tell your friends."

illustrations by Andrew Burdan



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by Heidi Wang

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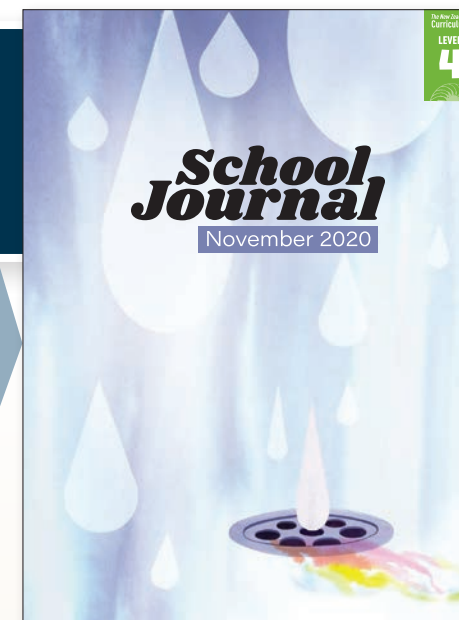
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