



There are a few Samoan words in this story. Here is how to say them and what they mean.

fale (FAH-lay)—house

lavalava (LAH-vah-LAH-vah)—cloth worn as skirt or kilt

malae (mah-LIE)—open space in middle of village

Mamona (Mah-MO-nah)—Mormon

matai (mah-TIE)—titled head of related Samoan families

pale (PAH-lay)—flower headdress

palusami (pah-loo-SAW-mee)—taro leaves cooked with coconut cream

umu (oo-moo)—oven where food is cooked on hot stones

NOTE: Samoan words do not add an *s* to make them plural. Thus *fale* can be used for *house* or *houses*.



**T**his celebration was so special that I traveled more than four thousand miles to return to my Samoan village of Faletele. The village was already bustling with activity. Crowding in with the few hundred villagers were more than a hundred of my relatives from many parts of Samoa and scores of honored guests from other villages.

I started walking through the *malae*, heading toward the big, dome-roofed *fale*. There in that *fale*, visiting with the most honored guests, sat my beloved cousin Sama. Suddenly I was filled with pride and pain and love as I remembered when I first came to know Sama—Sama the Thumb.

I was a little girl then, just five years old. Sama was ten. His parents had gone to New Zealand for the dedication of the Mormon temple there, and Sama had come to stay with us.

I was sitting on the edge of the *malae*, watching the young men and boys play Samoan-style cricket, with dozens of players on each side. The spectators were shouting and cheering and singing and dancing to a rhythm beaten out on an old, empty kerosene tin. A bus stopped on the road, and one of my aunts got out, followed by a boy who struggled to carry a heavy basket. When they went to the Tuita'ua's *fale*, I followed them.

Tuita'ua Ioane was the main *matai* in our family. Hundreds of relatives honored and obeyed him. Tuita'ua is one of the great titles in Samoa, and the Tuita'ua is respected by all Samoans.

"Go get Tofo and Malini," Tuita'ua Ioane ordered me.

I ran back to the cricket match to fetch my cousins. They weren't happy to give up their places in the match, but they obeyed the Tuita'ua's orders to fix fried corned beef and baked bananas and lemonade for him, our aunt, and the boy—who we learned was our cousin Sama. They bowed low and showed great respect when they served Tuita'ua Ioane his food on a leaf-covered tray. But I saw them scowl at Sama when they placed his food in front of him.

In the days that followed, scowls were



replaced by smiles and laughs. Sama won us over with his stories and jokes and his sense of humor. Even though most of the cousins were much older than Sama, they soon accepted him not only as a cousin but also as a good friend. I tagged along when they gathered coconuts, chopped the grass with bush knives, played cricket, went inland to plant taro in the family taro patch, and sang songs while strolling through the village after evening prayer services. When Sama was with us, whether we were working or playing, we laughed and had fun.

Then on Saturday the boy cousins went spear fishing in the lagoon. Sama caught an octopus and was treated like a hero.

After the cousins had cooked the evening meal of fish, taro, *palusami*, and, of course, octopus, two of the cousins grabbed Sama's arms and held him while another cousin beat out a solemn rhythm on a log. Tofo marched up to Sama carrying a tray of food, including the best parts of the octopus. Tofo's face was stern.

"We honor Sama, the great octopus hunter," Tofo said. "As long as you are here in Faletele, you, Sama, will have the honor of serving the Tuita'ua." Then Tofo smiled and handed the tray to Sama, and





Malini put a necklace of fragrant buds around Sama's neck and a red hibiscus flower in his hair.

On Sunday morning I couldn't find Sama. All day I asked the people of the village if they had seen him, but nobody knew where he was.

Finally, in the late afternoon, long after our church services and our after-church meal were over, Sama came walking through the village in his white shirt and white *lavalava*. Tuita'ua Ioane called him into the *fale*. "Where have you been, Sama?" he asked.

"In Fuapa'epa'e."

"You walked eight miles to Fuapa'epa'e? And back?"

"Yes, Your Honor."

"Why?"

"Because that is the closest village where I can attend my church."

Tuita'ua Ioane took off his wire-rimmed reading glasses and laid them on the Bible, which he'd been reading. "Sama, the *matai* has made a decree that there will be only one church in Faletele and that all the people in Faletele will attend that church. Do you understand? You are part of my family, Sama, but you are also

a guest in this village and you are under my protection. You know our rule." He leaned forward and looked Sama in the eyes. "You do what you have to do."

The following week none of the cousins mentioned Sama's trip to Fuapa'epa'e. They continued to joke and laugh together as they worked in the taro and helped harvest a truckload of bananas that would go to New Zealand. On Saturday we all hiked to our secret waterfall, where we splashed and swam and lay out on the big rocks to be warmed by the sun. On our way home we caught prawns in the stream for dinner.

Trouble started on the second Sunday. I woke up to the sounds of arguing. Malini and Tofo were chasing after Sama, who was dressed in his white shirt and *lavalava*.

"Sama, you know what the village rule is!" Tofo shouted.

Malini grabbed Sama's arm. "How can you show such disrespect to your *matai*?"

Though Sama was shorter than the two older boys, somehow he seemed taller as he stood boldly in front of them. "Tuita'ua told me to do what I have to do. And this is what I have to do!"

As he started walking again, Malini shouted after him, "Sama, don't embarrass your family like this!"

At the end of the day when Sama came walking back into Faletele, a woman made fun of Sama, calling him a bad name. All the cousins were angry at Sama and wouldn't talk to him—all of them, that is, except me. I was glad to see Sama, and it was the first time that I had him all to myself. It was wonderful as we talked and sang and he told me stories.

In the morning the cousins took their long poles and went up the hills to gather breadfruit. Sama and I hurried after them.

We talked and joked as we knocked the breadfruit from the trees. It was almost like before, and all the cousins were starting to have fun together again. Then a group of villagers came by and called Sama "*Mamona*" and said mean things about Sama and our family.

There was no more joking among the cousins. For the rest of the week the



cousins refused to include Sama in anything that they did. Tofo told me not to talk and play with him, but I did anyway whenever I could find him. Mostly he went off by himself into the forest.

"Maybe tomorrow you will remove our family shame and come with us to the village church," Malini told Sama on Saturday night.

But on Sunday morning Sama was gone again. Next to each of our sleeping mats was a gift that Sama had made—octopus lures for Tofo and Gutu, a flute for Malini, toy fishing canoes for 'Ene'ene and Pisa, and a top and a *pale* for me.

When Sama returned that evening, I put on my *pale* and ran out to greet him. He was happy and eager to see the others—until he stepped on something in the grass. He looked down and saw one of the canoes he had made, now smashed and broken. He looked around and saw that his other gifts had also been broken and discarded.

"The villagers got them mad," I explained. "But I kept mine. I like my presents very much. Thank you."

Sama smiled at me, then went off by himself until it was time for the evening meal. As Sama got a tray of food ready for the Tuita'ua, Tofo grabbed the tray

away and shouted, "You are a disgrace to your family! You no longer get the honor of serving the Tuita'ua!"

"And find someplace else to sleep," Malini yelled. "You're no longer welcome in the boys' *fale*."

'Ene'ene pushed Sama down, and Gutu raised his fists to hit Sama. "Because of you, our friends are calling us dirty names!"

I was afraid that the cousins were going to hurt Sama, so I ran to get Tuita'ua Ioane. But he had heard and had already come to the edge of the *fale*. "You boys, stop it now!" he commanded. "All of you, come in here!"

At the sound of his voice, the boys immediately stopped. They walked meekly into the *fale* and sat down across from the old *matai*.

"Look at my hand!" Tuita'ua Ioane held out his hand. "See how these fingers are bunched here together? And how the thumb is out here all by itself?"

We all looked at his hand.

"We have a saying here in Samoa: 'The thumb stands alone, but it is the strongest of all the fingers.'"

Tuita'ua Ioane pointed at each of the cousins. "You boys are the fingers. But Sama is the thumb!"

Even though I was very young, I learned many things that night. Tuita'ua Ioane taught us about integrity, about standing up for what you think is right no matter what other people say, about being true to yourself and valiant in your beliefs. His words and Sama's example changed my life.

As I stood on the *malae* thinking back to those days, a small girl came up to me and handed me a *pale*.

"Thank you." I smiled at her and put it on. Then I walked up the steps of the big *fale* and removed my shoes. Sama saw me immediately. I made a thumbs-up sign. That had always been my secret sign to him. None of the other *matai* in the *fale* seemed to notice, and even if they did, it wouldn't mean the same thing to them. They were there for just one reason—to honor the new Tuita'ua. Tuita'ua Sama.

But to me he would always be Sama the Thumb.

